MY
HAPPY
MARRIAGE
AKUMI AGITOGI
1

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MY HAPPY MARRIAGE

1

Akumi Agitogi

Illustration by
Tsukiho Tsukioka

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MY HAPPY MARRIAGE 1

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AKUMI AGITOGI

Translation by Kiki Piatkowska

Cover art by Tsukiho Tsukioka

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PROLOGUE

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Miyo Saimori.”

Kneeling on the tatami floor, she bowed deeply with as much grace as she could muster, drawing in the familiar scent of fresh rushes mixed with the unfamiliar smell of his house. She knew all too well that she was unwelcome, but she nonetheless wanted to prove she had good manners.

“…”

As if unaware of her presence, the man who was to become her husband didn’t so much as shoot her a glance while he tended to some papers spread out on his writing desk. She remained prostrate on the floor, careful not to make the slightest movement as she awaited his response. Being unacknowledged or ignored was something she was unfortunately used to, and she didn’t want to risk upsetting this man, whom she was meeting for the first time in a strange new place.

“How much longer do you intend to prostrate yourself?”

His low, imperious voice eventually broke the silence. Miyo lifted her head and met his gaze for the first time before immediately bowing down again.

“Please forgive me.”

“…I wasn’t asking for an apology.” Her handsome fiancé sighed before commanding her to sit up straight.

Getting a better look at him this time, Miyo saw that her betrothed, Kiyoka Kudou, was even more stunning than she’d expected. His porcelain skin was free from imperfections, and his pale-blue eyes were framed by long ash-blond hair so fine as to be almost

transparent. Coupled with his slender physique, his fair appearance lent him an ephemeral beauty shocking to see in a man.

The tales she'd heard of his mercilessness, of his cruelty as a soldier who'd put his opponents to the sword without hesitation, seemed incongruous before his countenance. *Yet*, she thought, *appearances can be deceiving*. Miyo knew firsthand that even those pleasing to the eye could harbor hearts filled with venom. He must have been one of those people. Why else would all the previous brides have fled within three days of their marriage?

But for Miyo, there would be no turning back. She had neither home to return to nor anyone she could rely on for help.

Regardless of what hardships might await her here, she had no choice but to stay.

CHAPTER 1

Of Our Meeting and My Tears

Just as any other noble family, the Saimori household began their day with a leisurely breakfast in the living room of their sprawling traditional Japanese residence in the capital. Or at least it would have been leisurely, were it not for a shrill voice that pierced the fresh morning air.

"What's this supposed to be?!"

Scalding-hot liquid splashed on Miyo's face and chest. She didn't even whimper as she groveled on the floor. The beautiful younger woman holding a teacup raised her eyebrows in outraged disbelief as her older sister, dressed in a threadbare serving girl's outfit, bowed in abject apology. As usual, the house staff present in the room averted their gazes.

"The tea is so bitter, it's undrinkable!"

"I'm terribly sorry…"

"Make me a fresh cup at once!"

Despite having brewed the tea exactly the same as always, Miyo demurely acknowledged her half sister's request as if she was her servant and hurried to the kitchen, head hung low.

"Goodness me, she can't even make tea properly. Has she no shame?"

"Indeed. She's such an embarrassment."

Miyo pretended she couldn't hear her half sister and stepmother snickering at her derisively as she left the room. One might think her

father would intervene and stop them from mocking his daughter, but he simply continued his meal as if nothing had happened. He hadn't defended her once in the past several years, and by now, Miyo harbored no hope that he ever would.

Unearthly creatures had plagued this country since time immemorial. Some of these beings resembled humans or animals; a few were so twisted they defied description; and still others fluidly changed shape, refusing to settle on a fixed form. These otherworldly entities, also referred to as fiends or spirits, were malicious to humans.

The task of hunting them fell to the Gifted, descendants of bloodlines that possessed supernatural powers. Only this select few could see the Grotesqueries using Spirit-Sight and dispatch them with supernatural attacks, their sole weakness. Indispensable to the empire, the Gifted enjoyed high social status.

The Saimoris were a long-established noble line, one of the families who'd risen to prominence through ridding the land of Grotesqueries. Miyo was the eldest of her generation. Her parents' marriage had been purely strategic. Both her father and mother possessed the Gift, and their respective families had arranged the marriage to improve the bloodline. Although her father had been opposed to this, his protests went unheeded. Eventually, he broke off his relations with his lover and reluctantly consented to marry the woman who was to become Miyo's mother.

Their loveless union resulted in Miyo's birth. Apparently, they had cherished their daughter in her first few years of life. Her memories of that time were hazy at best, but she'd heard that her father used to dote on her and that she was the apple of her mother's eye.

Everything changed, however, when her mother passed away from illness when Miyo was two years old and her father married his former lover.

Miyo's stepmother hated her for being the child of the woman who'd separated her from Miyo's father. Her father, meanwhile, was so overcome with guilt toward his second wife that he deferred to her in everything. To make matters worse, he lost all interest in Miyo when her half sister was born, since he preferred the daughter of his beloved.

Kaya, Miyo's younger sister, was not only the more beautiful of the two, but also skilled at twisting people around her little finger. To top it all off, she possessed Spirit-Sight, which Miyo lacked. It hadn't taken long for the younger girl to begin treating her sister with scorn, just as her mother had done.

Then Miyo turned nineteen, an age when girls from good households would usually marry. But since even the servants outranked her in the house, she received not a single proposal. Furthermore, she was penniless because her family had never given her a stipend, which kept her from moving out.

"Here's your tea." Miyo placed a freshly brewed pot of tea on Kaya's tray. Her stepmother huffed but didn't comment.

Miyo was convinced she'd spend the rest of her life as their slave.

She'd already given up hope.

Her parents and sister finished their breakfast. Miyo cleared the table with the servants and then went outside to sweep the front steps. She rarely cleaned inside the house to keep out of the way of her stepmother and sister, who were always looking to complain

about something and saddle her with additional tasks. The servants were well aware of this, and she suspected they sympathized with her, because her share of the chores was always laundry and outdoor tasks. This allowed Miyo some welcome respite on the days when her stepmother and sister didn't leave the house.

"Hello."

Miyo had been cleaning in silence until close to noon when a guest arrived.

"Ah. Hello, Kouji." She bowed at the newcomer, who smiled at her gently.

This well-disposed man with a pleasant, handsome face and dressed in a well-tailored three-piece suit was Kouji Tatsuishi, the second son of another distinguished family with the Gift. His estate was nearby, so he'd known both Miyo and Kaya since childhood. Most importantly, he saw Miyo as a rightful daughter of the Saimori family and was a true friend to her.

"It's a nice day, isn't it? Very warm."

"Indeed. That will make the laundry dry quickly." She didn't have anyone else with whom she could indulge in such small talk.

Kouji had tried many times to do something to improve Miyo's situation when her family had started to treat her like a servant. Ultimately, his father, the head of his family, gave him a severe talking-to and forbade him from interfering with another family's private matters. Although Kouji hadn't been able to openly take her side since then, she still considered him an ally.

"By the way, here's a little something for you," Kouji told her.

"…You brought me sweets?"

He had handed her a box wrapped in beautiful Japanese paper.

“Sure did. I hope you don’t mind it’s not one of those trendy Western cakes. I heard they tend to get smashed in transit.”

“Thank you. I’ll share them with the servants.”

“Please do.”

Only then did something occur to Miyo.

“And what brings you here today?”

While he would dress smartly when visiting, his attire that day was more formal than usual, and it was very rare for him to wear Western clothes. Kouji’s expression clouded over at Miyo’s question before he looked away, as if embarrassed.

“Well. You see, I…have an important matter to discuss. With your father.”

He was stumbling over his words. Even though Kouji was the quiet type, he wasn’t normally so evasive. Perplexed, Miyo tilted her head to the side and wondered what was wrong with him. But he simply responded with a “See you later” and quickly disappeared into the house. Miyo was curious about his business with her father, but she silenced her thoughts by telling herself it was none of her concern and reached for the broom again.

She was the oldest daughter of the Saimori family and had been duly entered into the family registry. In practice, however, she was no different from a poor girl of common stock—talentless, uneducated, and plain-looking. It dawned on her that she and Kouji now lived worlds apart. Suddenly, her heart felt heavy. To distract herself, she focused on sweeping until one of the servants came out of the house to call her.

“Your father wishes to see you, miss.”

“Huh?”

“He’s asking for you to come at once.”

“Oh, I-I’ll be right there…”

Miyo had a bad feeling about this. She was little more than a servant to her family, so it made no sense for her father to summon her specifically while he was receiving a guest. Something out of the ordinary was happening, and it filled her with fear. Though she struggled to stop her legs from shaking, she made it to the reception room.

“Excuse me. It’s me, Miyo,” she called out from behind the sliding door.

“Enter,” came her father’s curt response. The hard tone of this command amplified her anxiety, and her fingertips pressing against the sliding door felt icy cold.

Inside sat not only her father and Kouji but also her stepmother and Kaya. Despite sensing that they had bad news for her, she concealed her fear behind an expressionless face. She sat down near the entrance, distancing herself from her grimacing stepmother and half sister. Her father began to explain the matter at hand in a detached voice without even glancing her way.

“I would like to discuss the prospect of marriage as it relates to the future of this family. Miyo, I thought it best for you to be present for this as well.”

Marriage? Hearing that word made her heart skip a beat. Thinking about how marriage could change her life brought her both fear and anxiety, yet it also rekindled the faintest of hopes within her. Perhaps it could be a change for the better. A moment later, however, she chided herself for entertaining such fantasies. Miracles simply didn’t happen—not to her, at least. Her father’s strong voice broke the silence once again.

“Kouji will be adopted into our family so that he may continue our family name. As such, he will need a wife to support him. Kaya, you will be his bride.”

Of course it would be her. Though Miyo should have expected as much, she nevertheless felt as if a chasm had opened beneath her. Everything went black for a moment as fear, or maybe despair, overwhelmed her. Kaya’s smug look didn’t even register. Miyo had been aware of her father’s plans to adopt Kouji, the Tatsuishi family’s second-oldest son, so at some point, a faint beacon of hope must have unknowingly wormed its way into her heart.

Hope that she might have married the one and only man she trusted. That she would have become proprietress of the Saimori household. That Kaya would have been married off and sent away so Miyo would no longer have to live in her shadow. That one day she would have been able to freely converse with her father again, as they had in the past.

It was all so foolish. She should have known that fate simply wasn’t in her cards.

“Miyo, you will be betrothed to the Kudou family’s heir, Kiyoka Kudou.”

She couldn’t even bring herself to look up. Instead, she gave her reply in a shaking voice, head hanging limply.

“As you wish, Father.”

“What, aren’t you glad to marry into the Kudou family?” Kaya added with insincere enthusiasm.

The Kudou family also possessed the Gift. Many of their lineage were blessed with exceptional supernatural powers, and the clan distinguished itself through countless feats of valor, some of

legendary proportions. Their social standing, fame, and wealth were leagues ahead of their peers'.

On the other hand, Kiyoka had a reputation for being heartless. Of all the girls from well-heeled families who'd been offered to him as brides, none had managed to bear him for more than three days before running back home. Miyo had heard as much from the servants' gossip. If those tales were true, the man must be horrible indeed.

And now her father was telling her to marry him, likely intending to never allow her to step foot into this house again. Miyo had no education. Her father was certainly aware that there was no chance of this arrangement going well.

"It's really such a waste to give you this wonderful opportunity, since you have no redeeming qualities. You're really in no place to do anything so rude as to refuse, of course."

Her stepmother was in high spirits at the prospect of finally ridding herself of the stepdaughter she abhorred.

"Yes, you have no choice but to accept. Pack your things, and as soon as you're done, we'll have you sent to Mr. Kudou's house."

Miyo turned pale, unable to speak. Although she used to look forward to leaving the Saimori house, with the Kudou residence as her destination, she would be going out of the frying pan and into the fire. From there, she could envision only two possible outcomes. Either this merciless man would throw her out of his estate on the spot, or she'd irritate him and he'd cut her down where she stood. Her only hope was that he'd treat her like a lowly servant, just as her family did.

Very rarely did a potential bride stay with the man her family wanted her to marry in order to learn the rules of his household and find out whether they were compatible before making their

betrothal official. The precautionary measures made sense in light of Kiyoka's reputation as a difficult groom, but Miyo saw them differently—as evidence that her family wanted to get rid of her as soon as possible. Her world turned black.

After she left the reception room, enveloped in dark thoughts, she heard Kouji calling her name.

"Yes, Kouji?"

She turned toward him. Anguish and embarrassment colored his face, something she'd never seen before.

"Miyo, I'm sorry. I'm so useless. I couldn't do anything for you, and I don't even know what to say now."

"You need not apologize, Kouji. Such is fate. It simply wasn't in my favor."

Miyo tried to grin to lift the mood but found it hard to change her expression, as if her face had frozen solid. Come to think of it, when was the last time she'd smiled?

"No, you can't just put it down to fate!"

"On the contrary. It's fine, Kouji. I don't mind Father's decision. Who knows—I may even find happiness in my new life."

She didn't actually believe that, but she said it with conviction anyway, as if to reassure herself.

"…Do you hate me now?"

Kouji seemed on the verge of tears. Clearly, he wanted her to take it out on him for not having advocated for her. She could glimpse that in his eyes. But Miyo was too drained to cater to his emotional needs right now, so she decided to cut things short.

“No, I don’t. I distanced myself from such emotions long ago.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so terribly sorry. I wanted to save you so that we could laugh together again, like we used to. I wanted to—”

“Kouji!”

Kaya had yelled his name upon exiting the room after them. There was something terrifyingly twisted lurking beneath her dazzlingly beautiful smile.

“What were you two talking about?”

“…”

Her husband-to-be bit his lip, swallowing what he hadn’t gotten to say.

“N-nothing important.”

Kouji came from a respected family and had been blessed with the Gift and handsome looks, but he had one flaw. He was a coward who was too worried about upsetting others. Taking a side would hurt either Miyo or Kaya, so he’d clammed up. Miyo didn’t know what he’d been gearing up to say before her sister had interrupted, but at this point, she didn’t care. And yet, even though it hadn’t amounted to anything in the end, it was true that the kindhearted Kouji had come to her aid many times in the past.

“Kouji.”

“Yes…?”

“Thank you for everything.”

That was all she could say. She was utterly exhausted.

Kaya smiled charmingly as she watched her sister bow deeply and walk away without looking back.

Sleep eluded her that night. Miyo's room, a servant's bedroom barely five square meters in total, was austere to begin with. Now that she'd packed away her few personal possessions, there was really nothing left. Her stepmother and half sister had thrown away or stolen the kimonos she'd inherited from her mother. The same had happened to any other valuable items she'd once possessed. Now the only things she could call her own besides her body were a servant's outfit, a set of plainclothes hand-me-downs from one of the workers, and some personal care items.

Later that same day, however, her father had given her a set of fine clothes so that she wouldn't bring shame to the Kudous by arriving at their residence dressed in rags. His gift finally opened her eyes to the fact that her father had been aware she'd owned no presentable clothes but had simply been unbothered by her plight until now.

As she struggled to fall asleep, wrapped in the flimsy quilt she'd had no choice but to grow used to, memories of the past flashed before her eyes like images in a kaleidoscope. The happy ones were distant, while the more recent ones were filled with pain and misery. Nothing was going to change for the better the next day. She was going to sleep hoping only that her life would soon end. A simple wish. It felt as though she were teetering on the brink between the worlds of the living and the dead. Emotionally spent, she couldn't even smile bitterly as those thoughts raced through her mind.

The Kudou family was especially distinguished, even among other noble clans with the Gift. Pretty much all Gifted families had made a name for themselves many generations ago, becoming firmly established in the nobility, but the Kudous outranked the majority of them. In addition to a court rank, they'd also been granted vast

tracts of land. Miyo had heard that with so much land in so many different parts of the country, they could make as much money as they liked simply by leasing it out.

The current head of the family was Kiyoka Kudou, twenty-seven years old. He'd passed the elite military induction exam after graduating from university, and he now served as major with a unit of his own. Based on his youth, influence, and extraordinary wealth, Miyo reckoned he enjoyed a lavish lifestyle.

Early in the day after her father's pronouncement, Miyo left home dressed in elegant clothes that hung awkwardly on her thin frame. Clutching a modest bundle containing her belongings, she set off for the Kudou residence. A few tram rides—a novelty for her—later, she thought she'd arrived near the address she'd been given but found herself on the outskirts of the city, with nothing resembling a luxurious estate in sight.

Does the head of the Kudou family really live around here? she wondered.

While it was only a stone's throw from the city, the landscape was mostly forests, plantations, and fields, dotted with just a few houses. It occurred to her that it must get pitch-black here at night, unlike in the city. No one had been sent out to meet her, and there hadn't been a matchmaker or go-between involved in the marriage talks. The Saimori servant who accompanied her to the city's outskirts had turned back and left her to walk the country path alone.

After a while, she arrived at a house in the woods, which could've been mistaken for a hermitage if it were but a little smaller. Though she could scarcely believe this unassuming domicile was the right place, the automobile parked outside was a clear indication of the owner's wealth. Cars imported from overseas were far beyond the financial means of ordinary people. This had to be where Kiyoka Kudou lived.

“Hello…”

Her hesitant knock was answered immediately.

“Just a moment… May I have your name?”

A kind-looking petite old lady stuck her head out the door. Judging from her attire, she must have been a servant.

“My name is Miyo Saimori. I’ve been asked to come here to see Mr. Kiyoka Kudou regarding a marriage proposal…”

“Ah yes, Miss Saimori. We’ve been expecting you.”

Based on Kiyoka’s reputation, Miyo had imagined his servants to be cold and emotionless, closer to dolls than people. This smiling old lady’s friendly demeanor and tone momentarily threw her.

“Please come on inside. I’ll show you to the study where the young master is.”

Upon receiving this invitation, Miyo crossed the threshold of the house. Compared with her family home, this place was rather cramped. She guessed it had been built recently, seeing how pristine its wooden exterior was. The inside also seemed more comfortable than she’d initially assumed.

As they walked down a short wood-floored corridor, the woman introduced herself as Yurie. She was indeed a servant and had been employed at this house ever since she’d served as Kiyoka’s nursemaid.

“I know there are many nasty rumors about the young master circling around, but he’s actually a good-natured person. You needn’t be so afraid, really.”

Yurie spoke to her in a reassuring tone, mistaking Miyo’s silence for fear. But Miyo wasn’t feeling chatty for other reasons—she’d learned not to speak unless absolutely necessary, so silence had become a

habit. Whenever she'd dared to speak at her own home, they would punish her for being brazen, for talking back.

"Thank you, that's heartening to hear."

She didn't really think so, since it made no difference to her whether he proved to be nice or not. What did matter, however, was that the moment she was rejected, she would be left to die on the streets. Maybe she should have made peace with that thought. Death might be painful, but there'd be no more suffering afterward. She'd be free.

Yurie opened the door to Kiyoka's study for her. Miyo entered, knelt on the floor, and bowed deeply.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Miyo Saimori."

"…"

Engrossed in something at his desk, Kiyoka Kudou did not turn to look at her. Miyo had been trained to remain silent and motionless without explicit permission or order to do otherwise, so she held the bow, awaiting his response.

"How much longer do you intend to prostrate yourself?" he finally asked in a low voice.

Thank goodness, she thought with some relief. *He did hear me.* Simply acknowledging her existence was an act of kindness in her eyes. She lifted her head for a moment before bowing down again.

"Please forgive me…"

"I wasn't asking for an apology," he said with a sigh.

She finally sat up straight. Illuminated by the gentle spring sunshine coming through the window, Kiyoka looked so stunning that she had to avert her gaze.

He's beautiful.

Miyo had thought she knew what that word meant. Both her stepmother and half sister were very attractive, and the Tatsuishi family, Kouji included, had also been blessed with above-average looks. But Kiyoka was in a league of his own. He had masculine dignity and feminine grace; his exquisite features were fine and delicate. Anyone, be they young or old, male or female, would agree that he was not only handsome but radiant.

"Are you the latest bridal candidate?"

She nodded in affirmation. He grimaced.

"Then I have this to say to you. You must obey my every order. If I tell you to get out, get out. If I tell you to die, die. I don't want to hear any complaints or objections," he barked before turning his back on her again.

Miyo stared in disbelief. She came here prepared for humiliation and verbal abuse. Was this really all he wanted?

"Understood."

"Hmm?"

"Is there anything else…?"

"…"

"In that case, if you'll please excuse me…"

He turned toward her with an odd expression on his face. It didn't seem as if he had anything further to say, so she left the room.

"They're gone! All gone! What happened?"

Upon hearing her tearful voice leave the lips of the panicked little version of herself, Miyo realized she was dreaming. It was a dream

about the worst day of her life, which had been painfully etched into her memory for all eternity. She'd still attended school back then. One day, she'd returned home after classes to find her room empty.

"Where is everything?!"

All her things were gone, including the precious mementos of her mother: kimonos, sashes, and accessories. Even the makeup mirror and her mother's lipstick had vanished. Miyo quickly determined it must have been her stepmother's doing.

"Lady Miyo, whatever is the matter?!"

Hana the maid came running when she heard Miyo's wailing. She had been looking after the girl since she was born, so she was like a mother to her.

"It's all gone! Even Mother's things!"

"Goodness!" Hana cried. "How could this have happened?"

Hana had been out shopping and hadn't noticed anything. She began apologizing profusely, swallowing back tears. Miyo bit her lip.

"My stepmother did it—I just know it."

Miyo was just two years old when she lost her mother. Her father had wasted no time in remarrying, and Kanoko, Miyo's stepmother, had despised the girl since day one. Kanoko's daughter, Kaya, was three years younger than Miyo but already showed great potential. She'd inherited her mother's extraordinary beauty and was a quick learner. Not only that, she'd already displayed the signature ability of the Gifted—Spirit-Sight, which allowed her to see the Grotesqueries. None of this could be said of Miyo.

Miyo's parents had married solely to pass their supernatural powers on to their heirs, and yet it had been Kaya, not Miyo, who'd been born with the Gift. And Kaya's mother came from a regular family with no special powers. In hindsight, Miyo's father had had

nothing to gain from breaking up with Kanoko, his sweetheart, to marry Miyo's mother. This discovery only further stoked Kanoko's hatred of her stepdaughter.

Miyo had only been a little girl then, but she'd understood that very well. Her stepmother had ensured she would, constantly remarking to her that "if only you hadn't been born, then everything would be better" or that "your mother was a thieving wench." But understanding someone didn't mean agreeing with them.

"I'm going to have a word with Stepmother."

Losing all her precious possessions wasn't something she could ignore. She needed the mementos of her mother back to keep sane in a hostile home.

"You're going on your own? Lady Miyo, I beg you to reconsider."

"Don't worry, Hana. If she doesn't listen to me, I'll tell on her to Father."

Back then, she'd still believed her father would take her side. He'd become increasingly distant toward her, but she was certain that if she pleaded with him and reminded him of how poorly they had treated her, then he would at least rebuke his second wife. Miyo couldn't have been more wrong.

"N-no! Let me out! Please let me out!"

When she'd headed over to her stepmother's chambers to ask if she knew anything about the strange disappearance of her belongings, Kanoko had flown into a rage, punishing the girl for calling her a thief by shutting her in a storehouse at the back of the mansion.

"You're not going anywhere until you think long and hard about your scandalous behavior. I should have expected as much from that homewrecker's daughter. To think you'd call *me* a thief! You're

rotten to the core. Thank goodness my own daughter is nothing like you."

"Stepmother, please! Please let me out!"

Barred from the outside, the door refused to budge no matter how hard she pushed or slammed her fists. Miyo pressed herself against it and shouted as loudly as she could, scared out of her wits. Her stepmother merely laughed at her for being pathetic and left. Even years after this episode, Miyo would still shake thinking about it.

There was only one small window high up on the opposite wall, letting in so little light that it was semidark inside the storehouse despite the sun being at its zenith. The cold dampness and stark emptiness of this long-disused space made it even more unnerving. Imprisoned there for an unknown length of time, little Miyo had been absolutely terrified.

"P-please… Let me out… Somebody help me…"

She bawled out apologies and pleas for help or forgiveness, but no one came. By the time she was released, it was the middle of the night; she'd been locked up since just past noon. Her father, whom she'd trusted to come to her aid if she was in need, hadn't shown up. But the tragic events of that day hadn't ended there. While she'd been trapped in the storehouse, the family had dismissed Hana and had immediately expelled her from the mansion for some made-up reason. And finally, they'd divested Miyo of her status within the household and would henceforth treat her worse than a servant.

Miyo woke up early as usual. Wiping tears from her face, she got out of bed. The previous day, Kiyoka had told her, "You must obey my every order. If I tell you to get out, get out. If I tell you to die, die."

Since she'd been subjected to those same rules growing up, it hadn't seemed like an unusual request, so she'd readily agreed.

When she'd left the study looking unperturbed, Yurie had been visibly relieved. She'd then showed Miyo to her new room. It was furnished only with the bare necessities: a futon, a desk, a chest of drawers, and a clock. For all its austerity, it was more spacious than the servant's bedroom Miyo had used before. Even the cozy bedding was of much better quality.

Miyo had hardly any luggage to unpack. She'd put her clothing away in the drawers, excused herself from dinner, and gone straight to sleep. That had been all for that day.

After waking up feeling fresh and well rested, perhaps thanks to the comfortable futon, she stood in her room with her head tilted to the side in uncertainty.

What should I do now…? She'd gotten up before sunrise like always, but that wouldn't be necessary once she married Kiyoka, the head of the Kudou family. Miyo's stepmother never got up this early. Miyo wasn't to live as a commoner but as the wife of an eminent noble, and wives of eminent nobles didn't do the cooking or cleaning.

But…I don't have any other skills.

She used to take classes in flower arrangement, tea ceremony, traditional dance, and koto until her stepmother had put an end to them, but that had been so long ago. What little she could remember now would undoubtedly be of nominal use. The chances of a practically uneducated girl becoming the wife of Kiyoka Kudou seemed slim to none.

Still, she couldn't just stay in her room doing nothing. She eventually settled on helping fix breakfast. While it would be out of place for Kiyoka's bride to do the cooking, she reminded herself that

her presence here was incongruous in the first place. However hard she might have tried, Miyo couldn't have emulated your typical wealthy married woman, just sitting there looking pretty in nice clothes, gracing people with delightful smiles. If she was going to be rejected regardless, she might as well make herself useful in her own way until then.

Besides, she wanted to help Yurie, who wasn't a live-in servant. Even in her old age, she commuted to the house every day in time to prepare breakfast before her master awoke. That must have been hard on her. If Miyo could relieve her of that burden, it would make Yurie's life a little easier. She hoped that would be an acceptable excuse if her unseemly actions provoked an outrage.

The pantry is well stocked with everything I could need. I'll cook rice, make miso soup… There's also dried fish; I can grill that. Then I just need to think of what vegetables to use for side dishes…

She made a list in her head as she checked the cupboards to see where the utensils were kept. Incredibly, this cottage in the woods had its own water supply. Miyo got the fire going in the oven and began cooking.

Even though her family employed a chef, Miyo was quite capable in the kitchen. If she hadn't learned to make her own meals, she wouldn't have eaten. Strictly speaking, she was neither a servant nor a rightful member of the family, meaning she hadn't been entitled to the lavish meals her father, stepmother, and half sister enjoyed or even the rations provided to the help. She'd only been able to use leftovers from the kitchen to scrape something together for herself. If there had been nothing left after the cook had finished preparing food for everyone else that day, she would go without eating.

Miyo's breakfast preparations were well underway when the kitchen door slowly slid open and Yurie peered in.

"…Miss?"

"Good morning, Yurie. Oh…I'm sorry for using the kitchen without asking you first."

"Good morning, Miss Saimori. You mustn't apologize. You're the young master's fiancée, so you can do as you please."

Yurie smiled cheerfully, dismissing Miyo's concerns with a wave of her hand. Rather than be cross with her, she was apologetic for having forced Miyo to trouble herself with the kitchen work.

Maybe I shouldn't have done this…

It seemed Miyo had only made the older woman embarrassed in her eagerness to help. Feeling glum, Miyo hung her head, but she looked up again with surprise when Yurie gently placed a warm hand on her back.

"As you can see, miss, I'm a wrinkled old lady. I'm truly grateful for your help."

"I-it's nothing…"

The small old woman's earnest smile moved her so much, her response got stuck in her throat.

"Well, the young master won't be getting up for a while. I shall tend to my other duties, if you don't mind finishing up here on your own?"

"Not at all, if that's fine with you."

Yurie nodded, satisfied with Miyo's answer. She quickly donned her apron and hustled out of the kitchen. Miyo was still a little crestfallen, but she focused on the cooking she'd been entrusted with. Yurie kept checking in on her as she worked and let her know when Kiyoka was about to get up. Miyo transferred the dishes she'd made to bowls and plates. There was steaming white rice, miso soup

with wakame seaweed and deep-fried tofu, boiled vegetables—which she'd prepared well in advance so that they had thoroughly absorbed the flavors of the seasoning—and freshly grilled dried mackerel scad, which smelled delicious. Last was blanched spinach with dashi broth, as well as pickles. It wasn't as good as the work of a professional chef, but she was nonetheless quite proud of how it turned out.

Accompanied by Yurie, she picked up the breakfast tray and headed to the living room. There they found Kiyoka, sitting cross-legged as he pored over a newspaper. It was the first time she'd seen Kiyoka in his military uniform. He cut a dashing figure with the top of his shirt leisurely unbuttoned.

Yurie had told her it was customary in this house to serve food on trays with legs, so the dining table had been put away. Miyo noticed wooden chairs left in a corner of the room.

"Good morning, Young Master. Breakfast is ready."

"Morning. Yurie, don't call me that in front of people."

Kiyoka was stunning even while pouting. So much so that Miyo became overwhelmed and had to avert her gaze.

"Young Master, it was Miss Saimori who prepared your breakfast this morning."

At that, he seemed to finally realize Miyo was also in the room. He folded his newspaper and looked at her with narrowed eyes. She was so used to being ignored that she'd have been happy to have gone unnoticed. If anything, the sudden scrutiny made her uncomfortable.

"…Did she, now?"

"She did. And she was so adept that I just left her to it."

Miyo braced herself for his fury. For him to shout that his future wife shouldn't be dirtying her hands with such work. But as she was

about to find out, Kiyoka had very different concerns than she could have imagined.

“Sit over there,” he commanded, his gaze as steely as his tone of voice.

She sat down in front of the breakfast tray she’d just placed before him. Kiyoka wasn’t reaching for his chopsticks.

“You try it first.”

“S-sorry…?”

She couldn’t possibly begin her meal before the head of the household. Her family had drilled it into her that her betters ate first, so now she was hesitant to comply with his request. At Yurie’s insistence, she’d brought her own tray, too, but it hadn’t crossed her mind that he would ask to have breakfast together. She hadn’t thought she was allowed to.

When Kiyoka saw that Miyo made no move to eat, his expression turned even more grim.

“You won’t eat it?”

The deep growl of his voice made her shudder, which he promptly misinterpreted.

“I, um…”

“Hmph. You poisoned it, didn’t you? It was only too obvious.”

“What…?”

“Poison?!”

Kiyoka ignored Yurie’s shout. He stood up from the floor.

“I won’t eat food that might have been tampered with. Take it away. You’ll have to try harder next time.”

With that, he left the room. Flustered, Yurie followed after him, leaving Miyo on her own. She turned deathly pale as it finally sank in that Kiyoka suspected her of making an attempt on his life. He wouldn't eat food someone he didn't trust had prepared… Just then, she remembered that her father, too, was always on his guard. Being in power meant living with the constant threat of assassination. Kiyoka must have also been targeted numerous times; men of high status feared poison above all other methods of murder.

How could I have been so blind?

She'd only just arrived and had already asked Yurie to let her do the cooking. Anyone would find it suspicious that a young lady from a noble family volunteered herself for the task and did it well. Maybe that hadn't occurred to Miyo because she was desperately trying to make herself useful to avoid being put out on the streets. She'd failed and made a grave error right from the start. If only she'd stayed put. She was thankful that he hadn't cut her down on the spot.

She picked up the chopsticks with her trembling hand and took one bite of the rice, which had dried out a bit by then. Even though it was nothing new for her to eat a cold meal alone, somehow the food felt as heavy as if she were eating stones.

The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit was an elite squad within the Imperial Army. It had been formed to deal with supernatural incidents. All members of the unit possessed Spirit-Sight and often other paranormal powers as well. Any type of supernatural ability was exceedingly rare, however, and those with the Gift were almost exclusively of noble birth. Since few aristocrats were willing to risk their life in military service, those who joined the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit tended to be eccentric. And thanks to its narrow

area of focus, it was both chronically shorthanded and relatively unknown.

The commander of this unit, Kiyoka Kudou, was now absolutely swamped with paperwork. While one had to demonstrate unparalleled skill to rise to a position of leadership within the unit, the work itself was mostly office-based, so he rarely got to participate in missions. Though he would personally tend to particularly difficult assignments or situations that warranted his direct involvement and would sometimes receive orders from above requesting his presence, his current priority was getting through the piled-up paperwork.

Today, however, he found himself uncharacteristically unfocused. He knew the reason—he kept thinking back to what had transpired that morning. Yet, he couldn't do anything to get it off his mind.

"I won't eat food that might have been tampered with."

He had left the new girl to mull over his words and returned to his room to get ready for the day. Yurie had followed him, full of reproach.

"That was no way to speak to a lady. Miss Saimori tried her very best to make that breakfast for you. If I am any judge of character, she isn't the poisoning type!"

Kiyoka still found it hard to argue with Yurie, who'd raised him in place of his mother, but this time he was determined to stand his ground. He would not eat a meal made by someone he'd only just met and who hadn't earned his trust yet. It had been a necessary precaution. Especially in light of her being a Saimori. Given how close in rank they were to his family, they could easily be plotting to

assassinate him to seize his social position. It made sense for him to be cautious. But if his actions had been logical, then why did he feel uncomfortable about what he'd done even before Yurie told him off?

"Young Master, may I tell you something?"

"Go on."

Yurie insisted that Miyo Saimori was somehow different from all the previous bridal candidates. Kiyoka had received many marriage proposals, more than a couple dozen. But none of the women had proved to be suitable for him. Some had indignantly turned away at first sight of his modest house. Some had angrily voiced their discontent, asserting it was ridiculous for a man of his stature to be living in a pitiful cottage. Still others had been sweet with Kiyoka but had pushed Yurie around behind his back, and yet more who'd been full of complaints, who'd disliked the food, who'd demanded a different personal room, and so on.

Kiyoka was sufficiently self-aware to know that his choice of domicile was unusual to say the least, but he was fed up with women who didn't even bother trying to understand the man they might end up marrying, instead criticizing him outright. He was a proud man and conscious of his importance—that he wouldn't deny. But he was neither conceited nor bossy, he thought, so he wouldn't stand those traits in other people, either. That had always been the deal breaker.

"I like her," said Yurie. "She's considerate and helpful, unlike any of the girls before."

"…Hmph."

He'd stolen a look at Miyo when he'd left the living room. Her expression had been impassive but had also somehow given him the impression that she'd been about to cry. Now that Yurie mentioned it, Miyo did seem different from his other suitors.

As he headed out for work, he found Miyo waiting for him by the front door, expressionless as earlier.

“Have a good day.”

She bowed her head mechanically, nothing tearful in her manner this time.

“I’ll see you later.”

With her head so low to the ground, she reminded him of a servant. What had this girl’s upbringing been like? Someone of her status wouldn’t normally have behaved so humbly.

It’s too early to make a decision about her, he concluded while looking through his paperwork. He wasn’t planning on keeping her around too long, but although she was a strange one, so far he didn’t dislike her. There was also the fact that this marriage offer seemed almost too good to pass up on.

What’s this now—I can’t get a girl out of my mind while I’m working? I’m losing my touch. He heaved a sigh and forced himself to concentrate on the documents in front of him.

Kiyoka returned home long after the sun had set. Miyo came out to greet him, once again kowtowing at the door.

“Welcome home.”

“…Thank you.”

“Um, if I may,” she began timidly when he was taking off his boots, her face unreadable as usual, gaze directed at the floor.

“What is it?”

"…I apologize for my brazen and thoughtless actions this morning. It's only natural for a man of your standing to refuse food from someone he can't trust. I should have realized that."

"…"

"Yurie has prepared the entirety of our dinner tonight, and I will be merely serving it. I swear on my honor that I haven't poisoned anything. Please, sir…"

She was pleading for his forgiveness, groveling on the floor. He would have understood if she was angry with him, but her apology made him deeply uncomfortable. Especially with how pitiful she was being. Her conduct made him feel guilty, as though he'd forced this apology on her. As if he was bullying this fragile girl who bowed before him, trembling slightly.

"I didn't really think you'd poisoned my food." He was just being careful, warning her of his concerns. "I didn't choose my words well, so I sounded too harsh."

"N-not at all! It was my mistake."

She shrank back in fear, looking even more pitiful. Kiyoka wasn't trying to intimidate her, yet she was clearly terrified.

He scrutinized her, further strengthening his earlier impression of how she didn't fit the image of a highborn girl. Her kimono was not just well-worn; it was flat-out shabby. The thinness of her neck and wrists could be explained only by malnutrition, and the long black hair she wore plainly tied back looked damaged and lifeless. On top of that, the skin on her hands was rough and cracked, as if she'd been cleaning or laundering daily. These days, even commoner girls from the city were more put together than her.

"Have you eaten yet?"

He couldn’t even see her head, which she’d barely raised to answer. “Ah… I, well…”

Kiyoka didn’t understand why she’d gone silent. He went into the living room and saw that only one tray of food had been set. If she’d already eaten, she could have just said so. It seemed lying wasn’t her strong suit.

“So you haven’t eaten? Why is there no food tray for you?”

Seeing her eyes nervously darting this way and that unnerved him. He assumed it was a universal custom for families and couples to eat their meals together, but maybe he was wrong. Or else this girl simply didn’t understand her position. He sighed.

Anxiety was eating Miyo alive that day. She’d foolishly cooked for a man who was wary of poisoning. It had resulted not only in the meal going to waste but also in Kiyoka going without breakfast. Were he truly as merciless as the rumors said, he’d have gotten rid of her at once. Regardless, it was only a matter of time before he kicked her out, like all his previous fiancées and prospective brides. Yurie had told her to pay it no mind, as if that were even possible. Miyo had no home to go back to. Maybe she should start looking for some place where she could work as a live-in maid. She wondered if she was cursed, doomed to upset people wherever she went.

When she made Kiyoka sigh in exasperation only a few minutes after returning from work, fear stabbed her chest like a knife. She bit her lip.

“Did Yurie not make food for you?” he asked.

No, no, he thought. *I shouldn’t doubt Yurie.* Miyo failed to notice the lack of hostility in his eyes or his nonthreatening tone. She panicked.

“I-it’s not her fault…”

Miyo had told Yurie not to make dinner for her because she’d finish off what was left from breakfast. She’d eaten a little bit for lunch but had handed over the rest to the food-waste collector from a nearby village. It hadn’t been because she hadn’t wanted to eat it—she really had—but after years of eating only one meal per day, her stomach had shrunk, and her earlier faux pas had ruined her appetite. This wasn’t something she wanted to confess to Kiyoka, though, since she feared how he might take it. Also, if she told him the truth, he would ask her why she wasn’t eating properly at her home and would find out about how her family had treated her there—something she preferred to keep under wraps.

“I… I had no appetite. I told Yurie not to cook for me.”

“Is that so? Are you feeling unwell?”

“No, I… I simply don’t feel like eating at times.”

Sensing that Kiyoka was losing patience, she gave an evasive answer. In truth, her appetite wasn’t a problem—back home, she just didn’t always get to eat.

“If you say so.”

He sounded tired. Miyo felt some relief, taking his concern about her health as a sign that he wasn’t thinking about telling her to pack her bags and leave just yet. He sighed again, told her he was going to get changed, and went to his study, which served as his bedroom.

He’s not an unkind man.

She thought back to what Yurie had told her when she’d arrived. *“I know there are many nasty rumors about the young master circling around, but he’s actually a good-natured person. You needn’t be so afraid, really.”*

Nevertheless, she was still afraid of him. He seldom smiled, and his eyes and voice that morning had been so cold that just remembering them was almost enough to make her shake like a leaf. Somehow his extraordinary beauty only made him more frightening.

And yet, his apology had caught her by surprise. He'd even asked if she was unwell. Slowly but surely, Miyo was discovering that Kiyoka wasn't as heartless as she'd initially taken him to be.

"It's gone cold," Kiyoka grumbled after taking a bite of his dinner.

Yurie had prepared the meal and elegantly plated it for him earlier without reheating it, so his food was now lukewarm. Her work finished, she had already left the house. Kiyoka allowed her to leave early, since she commuted.

"I'm very sorry…"

"This isn't your fault. Why do you apologize with every breath?"

Miyo was sitting diffidently against the wall, ready to respond in case he needed anything. He glanced at her sharply, and she lowered her head. Her constant apologizing was another habit she'd brought from home. Whenever she somehow managed to annoy her stepmother or half sister, they showered her in abuse, and her only recourse would be an abject apology. Their torment escalated if she didn't apologize at once, so it had become a reflex. But she couldn't reveal this to Kiyoka, so she sat in silence, staring at the floor.

"You won't say?"

"I'm so—"

"Don't apologize," he said, cutting her short.

While his voice was quiet, it held authority that commanded immediate obedience.

“Don’t apologize. Do it too often, and it loses its meaning.”

He was probably right, but she wasn’t sure if she could suppress that ingrained response.

“Thank you for the meal.”

Kiyoka set his chopsticks down, having finished his food before she knew it. His gorgeous appearance contrasted with his cold, intimidating demeanor. Miyo still found the stories of him being merciless and able to kill in cold blood believable, yet his mannerisms were utterly refined, without a trace of brusqueness. His gracefulness would befit a sheltered maiden from a noble house. Could this military man actually have a gentle spirit, like Yurie had said?

“I, um… I’ll go and heat up bathwater for you—”

He shook his head before she could finish with “right away.”

“I can take care of it.”

“But…”

“I’ve always done this myself. The bath here isn’t like in most homes. It’s difficult for anyone other than me to operate it.”

“How so?”

“It harnesses supernatural powers to heat the water. Yurie can’t use it, either.”

Miyo had heard that pyromancy was one of the powers his Gift bestowed, but it hadn’t occurred to her that it could be applied to heating up bathwater. *I really am clueless about such things.* Despite both her parents having the Gift in their bloodlines, she’d been born

without so much as Spirit-Sight. One more reason why she wasn't fit to wed Kiyoka, an aristocrat with extraordinary supernatural abilities.

"Is something the matter?"

"N-no, nothing at all."

She surmised he didn't know of her lack of special powers. While he didn't seem particularly interested in what the potential brides knocking at his door would bring to the table, he must have expected her to at least have Spirit-Sight on account of her lineage.

I shouldn't be the one to marry him.

She wasn't right for him. Kiyoka Kudou could do better than take her for a wife. A woman like Kaya, perfect in every way, would suit him so much more.

Later on, while Miyo was diligently cleaning up after dinner in the kitchen, Kiyoka checked in on her. He was dressed in light pajamas and fresh from his bath. Miyo tilted her head questioningly, and he explained he wanted her to make breakfast for him again.

"I'm sorry I didn't eat what you made for me this morning. You can make breakfast again tomorrow."

Kiyoka seemed relaxed after his bath, his threatening aura less intense. Although his brow was slightly furrowed, as if what he was saying to Miyo didn't come easily, his overall appearance was more youthful somehow, different from before.

Miyo was generally quick to agree to anything required of her, but the reason she'd upset him that morning was still fresh in her mind.

"Are you… Are you certain you want me to do that?"

"Yes. But if you do poison it, I will show no mercy."

“I would never dare do such a thing!”

She shook her head in horror. Of course, she didn’t even have the knowledge to poison anyone, nor would anyone choose her to attempt killing Kiyoka. If her father had wanted him dead, he’d have sent a trained assassin. All her father, stepmother, and half sister expected of her was rejection and ostracization.

“Then we won’t have a problem.”

He turned to walk away with a neutral—or perhaps satisfied—look on his face.

“Y-yes, sir…,” she mumbled, confused.

Bathed in sunshine, Kiyoka’s dwelling had a warm atmosphere. Birds were singing outside. But for Miyo, this beautiful home was no sanctuary.

“Splendid. Kaya, you possess Spirit-Sight. Kanoko, you have done well for giving me a Gifted daughter,” said Miyo’s father.

She remembered that day very well. It had happened before the events she’d dreamed of last night. She realized she was dreaming once again, this time about the day when Kaya had been found to possess the Gift.

“You should have expected no less of my daughter.”

Miyo’s stepmother was glowing with pride. Her father nodded with satisfaction. Kaya laughed joyously. They made the perfect picture of a happy family, but there was no place for Miyo among them. She wasn’t considered family. Her exclusion began well before they started treating her like a servant. No matter how hard she tried to please them, she wasn’t allowed into their circle of warmth.

“Did you hear, they found that Kaya has Spirit-Sight?”

“And she’s only three! That’s amazing.”

“Still nothing for Miyo, though.”

“There’s apparently not much of a chance of her turning out to be Gifted.”

“You’d think she would be, considering both her parents were.”

“Poor thing just doesn’t have it.”

The gossip echoed in her head. She was gradually diminishing in value, losing a place where she could belong. She could feel the change in the air as everyone in the house started worshipping Kaya and devoted less and less attention to Miyo. In hindsight, that had also been when Kaya’s attitude toward her half sister had shifted toward contempt.

Miyo loathed this memory. When they’d started using her as a servant, it had been hard on her physically, but before that, she’d already been suffering mental anguish. She’d been only a little girl, but already her fragile psyche was being torn to pieces.

“They don’t want me.”

She vividly remembered the day when she’d whispered that to herself. She hadn’t even been ten years old when she’d understood that the Saimori family hadn’t wanted her, a girl with no supernatural abilities to speak of, not even Spirit-Sight, and no other noteworthy qualities. Her maid, Hana, had burst into tears, had said how awful it was for a girl of her age to be denied parental love.

How was Hana getting on now? She hadn’t seen the maid once since her sudden dismissal while Miyo had been locked up in the storehouse. Hana had still been young then. Miyo hoped she’d married a good man and was living happily somewhere.

Yet again, Miyo awoke with tears streaming down her face. This made two nightmares in a row—luck really wasn't on her side. Perhaps they were a warning, a reminder that she never forget just how worthless she was.

I do remember.

She was painfully aware that she was so ordinary in every respect that no one had a use for her.

She used to wish she'd been born into some other family. She wouldn't have minded if they were commoners or if they might have been struggling a bit, as long as they'd loved her. *Hana should never see me like this.* Her former maid would be so sad to see what had become of her precious charge.

Quietly rising from bed, Miyo folded her futon before changing out of the *yukata* she'd slept in and into her day clothes. That was when she noticed that one of her kimonos was torn. The plain indigo cotton kimono had seen more than its fair share of wear. *It's no good anymore*, she thought. It was the seam at the back that had come apart; the stitching must have become damaged over time and eventually broken the thread. Since the edges of the seam had turned threadbare after innumerable past repairs, she probably wouldn't be able to fix it again. As she examined it, she could also see that some of the other seams were about to give, too. One of the servants had given Miyo the kimono after she'd grown out of it. It had already been quite old when Miyo had received it, so this had been a long time coming.

Still, it was quite a problem, since she had so few items of clothing to begin with. She might soon find herself without anything to wear at all. The new kimono her father had given her when he'd sent her

away was for special occasions, so she had to be careful not to get it dirty. Besides, it was a bit too showy to use as everyday wear.

Miyo decided she would try to mend the torn garment after all, provided that Yurie lent her a sewing kit. She finished getting dressed and went looking for the old lady, trying the kitchen first. It was around when she'd started cooking by herself the day before, but this time Yurie was already there.

"Oh, good morning, Miss Saimori."

"Good morning, Yurie."

Why did she come so early today? The question must have showed in Miyo's eyes, because Yurie smiled and hurried with an explanation.

"I was a little worried after yesterday, so I thought I'd best come in early. What should we do about breakfast?"

"Ah, yes… About that…"

Yurie had arrived early in case Miyo wanted to prepare breakfast again so that she could oversee her cooking and vouch for the safety of the food to assuage Kiyoka's concerns. But there was no longer any need for that. Miyo relayed to her what Kiyoka had told her last night.

"How typical of the young master, too proud to be honest and say he really wants to try your cooking."

"I don't think that's the case…"

"Heh-heh. Miss, would you permit me to lend you a hand?"

"Y-yes, of course."

The menu for that morning was thick-sliced fried tofu, rolled omelet, stir-fried burdock root with carrot, and blanched leafy vegetables in sesame sauce, complemented by the usual white rice

and miso soup. While these dishes frequently appeared on the table at the Saimori house, Yurie's way of cooking them was slightly different from how the Saimori chefs had prepared them. She didn't obsess over julienning the vegetables into exactly uniform shapes or frying the tofu and omelet until they were perfectly golden. She judged the right amount of salt and spices by eye rather than measure everything precisely, and she didn't fuss over the choice or placement of crockery or the artistic presentation of the food. This was probably how home cooking was supposed to be. For better or for worse, professional chefs prepared food to an entirely different standard, one which amateurs could scarcely hope to imitate.

Since no one had ever taught Miyo how to cook, she was learning a lot from watching Yurie. The older woman first chopped the carrots and burdock root into thin strips, then set them aside and blanched the leafy greens in boiling water. She seasoned eggs for the omelet with soup stock, soy sauce, and sugar. The firm tofu she fried until browned on the sides was homemade.

"You're an early riser, aren't you, miss?"

"Yes, I've always been that way."

The old woman nodded, impressed.

"Yurie, there's something I wanted to ask you…"

"Yes?"

"Is there a sewing kit here that I could use?"

"There is. I can bring it to your room later."

"Thank you."

Miyo heaved a sigh of relief. Even daughters of aristocrats would often do some sewing, so her request hadn't raised any suspicions. Most blue-blooded girls wouldn't need to borrow sewing supplies from a servant, though.

They chatted while putting the meal together. By the time the kitchen had filled with the aroma of freshly fried tofu entwined with the mouthwatering sweet-and-spicy smell of stir-fried burdock and carrot, they were done.

Like the day before, they loaded the breakfast trays with food and carried them to the living room just as Kiyoka appeared.

“Morning.”

“Good morning.”

Seeing him dressed in his uniform made Miyo tense up again. His handsomeness made her feel even more insecure. She of all people was to become the wife of this dashing man? It was so absurd.

The living room wasn’t very spacious, so she and Kiyoka sat facing each other. Miyo wanted to move her tray farther away from him, but he stopped her with a stern look.

“Shall we eat?”

“Y-yes.”

Yet, she made no move to pick up her chopsticks, earning another suspicious glance from him.

“You have to eat, too.”

“I’m sor… I mean, yes.”

Ill at ease, she reached for the chopsticks and began her meal almost simultaneously with Kiyoka. The food tasted okay, but she feared he wouldn’t like it, no doubt being accustomed to fine cuisine. She nervously awaited his verdict as he daintily tried a little of a side dish and took a sip of the miso soup.

“…It’s good.”

“!”

“You season it a bit differently than Yurie, but it’s not bad.”

He said it so naturally that she could tell he was being honest. And yet, she scarcely believed her ears. He actually liked the food she made for him. The time she’d spent learning to cook by trial and error had paid off at last. It had been so many years since someone had praised her or recognized her efforts. A strange feeling welled up in her chest.

“That’s… That’s very kind of you to say,” she squeaked, managing to get the words out despite the tightness in her throat.

“……Why are you crying?”

Big tears rolled down her face one after the other before she’d even realized.

After Miyo’s tears stopped flowing, the rest of breakfast passed in peace, though they still didn’t make conversation. Kiyoka returned to his room, thinking of her. The image of her obsidian eyes turning glassy and then glistening with tears was seared into his memory.

At first, he’d been confused, thinking his remark had upset her, even though he’d intended it as praise. Maybe comparing her cooking with Yurie’s had offended her. He’d felt a little pang of self-reproach over his thoughtless remark. Nonetheless, he’d indeed thought the food had been good. Even though it had been different from Yurie’s usual fare, he’d been genuinely impressed by how much he’d found it to his liking. He’d spoken his mind unthinkingly, not imagining his statement would have been something to weep over.

Having never consoled a woman before, he was at a loss, not to mention internally panicking.

“P-please…for…forgive me…”

She haltingly offered further apologies.

"…I told you to stop apologizing."

Here she was crying and asking for forgiveness, which left him even more confused. The high-and-mighty women who'd preceded her would sometimes turn hysterical when they couldn't get their way, so he'd felt no remorse showing them the door. But now he was sheepish.

"I'm… I'm so sorry for my outburst. I was… I was so happy, and the tears wouldn't stop coming," Miyo replied with embarrassment as she gradually calmed down.

Knitting his brows, Kiyoka listened in earnest. Although she timidly told him this was the first time someone had ever praised her cooking, he sensed that this wasn't the sole reason she'd been so overwhelmed with emotion. She was an enigma. What had her life been like before coming to his house? What environment had she grown up in; what sort of people had been around her; how had she been raised? You could usually guess a person's background after speaking with them for a while, but this girl was different. Perhaps he couldn't figure her out because she had nothing in common with any of the former bridal candidates he'd met.

Adjusting the collar of his shirt, he shut his eyes to banish the image of her weeping.

"Yurie, correct me if I'm wrong…" He spoke to Yurie, who'd joined him in his room to help him get ready to go out. "Would you say this girl was raised…differently than most noblewomen?"

Ever since the day before, he'd had this feeling that something was off. He'd considered that her humility might have simply been an act meant to convince him she'd make a good wife, but her tears that morning had been genuine; he was certain of it. Simple praise had made her sob with joy.

“I should think so, yes,” Yurie replied with a solemn look on her face. She must have had some suspicions of her own.

“Do you think she would talk if I brought it up with her?”

“I doubt it…”

He could ask Miyo directly about her life at the Saimori house, but he also got the impression she was reluctant to talk about herself.

“Yurie.”

“Yes, Young Master?”

“I want you to keep a close eye on her, but be discreet about it. I’m going to see what I can learn about her family from the outside.”

He couldn’t marry someone he knew nothing about. Regardless of whether he would keep her, there was no harm in investigating her background at the earliest opportunity. Yurie nodded in acknowledgment, but then she looked up at him with a mischievous smile.

“I shall do as you ask. But, my, it is most unusual for you to be so intrigued by a fiancée, Young Master.”

“……I don’t need you pointing that out.”

He had to admit that no previous marriage candidate had caught his attention as much as Miyo had. No other noblewoman would patiently wait for his permission to look up at him after he’d ignored her bowing in greeting. These days, not even servants were so self-abasing, unless their employers were truly draconian.

“No need to be so shy about it.”

“I’m not being shy, and my interest in her is not of the kind you’re insinuating.”

“Well, I’m merely saying that with this attitude, you’ll be a bachelor forever.”

“…”

Just as he was about to tell her off for that impertinent comment, memories of the women who’d fled from him within a few days of their arrival, crying or screaming in anger, rushed back to him. He didn’t regret driving them away, although those moments made him question whether he was husband material. He didn’t know if he was being difficult, but he certainly didn’t want to marry a woman like his own mother, a stereotypical rich girl.

“Personally, I think Miyo would be a lovely wife to you.”

“So you’ve decided she’s the one?”

“Yes.”

“With that much confidence, one would think you’re in charge here.”

It was only Miyo’s third day at Kiyoka’s house, but Yurie had already taken to her.

“Well, you know what to do,” he added.

“Yes, you can leave it to me, Young Master. I will make sure to extol all your virtues to her.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

While he was still slightly uneasy about this whole matter, this was the best way of handling things. He could trust Yurie to be tactful.

Decades had passed since the capital had moved from west to east. The city was home to a mind-boggling number of eminent houses, be they military families, aristocrats by birth, or people who’d been awarded peerage in recognition of their services. Then there were those without court rank who, either owing to their wealth or artistic

merits, were nevertheless considered members of the upper echelons of society.

Kiyoka's education had been strict and thorough, yet even he couldn't list all these distinguished individuals. Since the Saimoris were also a Gifted family, he knew their status and the name of the head of their household, but nothing else beyond that. He would have to do a little investigating.

I hope I won't discover any skeletons in their closet.

There were so few families with the Gift. He sighed, wondering if his prying might expose something that would discredit them.

Over at the Saimori home, two middle-aged men sat opposite each other, engaged in conversation. Despite their casual attire, the tension between them was so thick, you could cut it with a knife.

One of the men was Minoru Tatsuishi, the head of the Tatsuishi household and Kouji's father. He made no effort to cloak his agitation and displeasure as he accused the other man, Shinichi Saimori, of having reneged on their promise.

"Whatever do you mean?"

Shinichi was playing dumb, though one could surmise from his demeanor that he suspected what Minoru was getting at. The neutral expression on Shinichi's unremarkable face only further incensed Minoru.

"Don't take me for some fool. Why did you offer Miyo to Kudou? I told you I wanted her for my son."

"Ah, is this what you're so wound up about?"

Shinichi leaned back as if relieved that the matter was so trivial. While Gifted families were rare, there were still quite a few in the old

capital, so there was no lack of suitable brides for Minoru's second son. Truth be told, he didn't understand why Kouji would insist on a girl who didn't even possess Spirit-Sight, but to each his own.

"Between your son and Kudou, he was unarguably the better choice."

The Kudou family outranked the Tatsuishis. It was unlikely that they would accept Miyo, but if by some fluke they did, the Saimoris would establish valuable ties with a powerful house. Minoru was aware that Shinichi had no expectations for his firstborn daughter and didn't care much what happened to her, but if there was an advantage to be potentially gained from offering her to Kudou, Shinichi would gladly take that bet.

The relations between the Tatsuishi and Saimori families went back a long way, so Minoru understood Shinichi's motivations. Yet, he wouldn't be placated so easily when the other man had clearly played him for a fool.

"Miyo's mother comes from the Usuba bloodline. I wanted that Gift for my heirs."

"But Miyo didn't inherit the Usubas' Gift."

Minoru was seething with rage, yet Shinichi remained unperturbed, not looking guilty in the slightest.

It was clear by the age of five whether a person possessed the Gift. If they developed Spirit-Sight by then, they might also have other dormant powers. Miyo still didn't have Spirit-Sight at nineteen, so she was a write-off. She would bring no merit to the family, at least not directly.

"She might bear children with the skill."

"Are you so desperate for the Usubas' Gift?"

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t interested in the power to manipulate people’s minds! The Kudou family is formidable as is, and yet you seem intent on making them even stronger. What will become of the likes of us?”

“If Kudou returns her, hopeless as she is, you’re welcome to have her. She’ll probably weep with gratitude.”

Minoru couldn’t stop himself from quietly clicking his tongue with disgust. The Kudou family was so powerful that the Usubas’ Gift wouldn’t be especially desirable for them, and this Kiyoka Kudou was unusually picky about his wife-to-be, so he wouldn’t be interested in an ordinary girl like Miyo. As Shinichi had said, it was almost certain he would send her back. And yet, Minoru despised Shinichi for this line of thinking. The head of the Saimori family so worshipped his younger daughter that he was blind to the value of his eldest. And not only was this madman discarding a goose laying golden eggs, but he was also thwarting Minoru’s plans.

“Are you saying you no longer consider Miyo to be in your charge?”

“Correct, I’m disowning her. Whether she lives or dies, I honestly don’t care what happens to her.”

“I understand.”

Minoru wasn’t going to let Kudou snatch away his prize. He swore deep down that he would ensure his son would be the one to marry Miyo.

CHAPTER 2

The First Date

“Miss Miyo, may I come in?”

“Yes, please.”

Miyo opened the sliding door to her room for Yurie, who brought her a wooden box.

“Here is the sewing kit you requested.”

“Thank you.”

The box was beautifully made and expensive-looking. Miyo hesitated, unsure whether she was really allowed to use it. She openly asked Yurie, and the older woman shook with mirth.

“Of course you can. But if you’d prefer a brand-new one, please let me know.”

“No, no, this is perfect.”

She had no right to be choosy, since she’d arrived with practically nothing. A woman from a good house was expected to have her own sewing kit, but since she’d always used the servants’ threads and needles, she hadn’t considered that. Miyo felt so pitiful to have been sent away from home with no more than the clothes on her back.

She took the box from Yurie and remembered she had a burning question.

“Yurie, um…”

“Yes?”

“Was… Was Mr. Kudou angry with me this morning?”

“Angry? The young master?”

“Was he?”

Miyo must have made him so uncomfortable, bursting into tears out of the blue. She hung her head in sadness and embarrassment. When pretty women like her stepmother cried, men were only too glad to console them with an embrace. But that wouldn’t happen with Miyo. Her crying face must have been too hideous to even glance at. Although she thought it would have been in Kiyoka’s best interest to just throw her out already, she felt terribly bad over having made such a scene. She prepared for the worst when she posed the question, but the older lady opened her eyes wide in surprise.

“No, why would he be?”

“Because I… I…”

Miyo had grown up with her family constantly insisting that her very presence was unbearable. If she’d cried, they would rebuke her for making an ugly face, for being an embarrassment. Eventually, the tears she’d shed in response would flow only at night in her sleep.

Each morning, she brought nothing but displeasure to Kiyoka. Maybe she shouldn’t wait for his rejection and just run away already to spare him any more unpleasant situations.

“Miss, there’s nothing wrong with crying,” Yurie said to her gently. “It’s better than bottling up your emotions.”

“Really?”

“Yes. So when you feel like crying, let the tears flow. It’s not something that would make the young master angry.”

Could that be true? If Yurie said so, it must be, but it posed a dilemma for Miyo. She couldn’t easily change her behavior, and if she did allow herself to believe in people’s kindness, it would make being sent away that much harder. And although she’d been too

scared of her father to bring this up when he'd told her about the marriage offer, Kiyoka would certainly reject her once he found out she lacked the Gift, Spirit-Sight included. She had to be realistic. Her new life here was only temporary, so she had to be on guard against any warmth that might thaw her frozen heart.

"I'll be going back to the kitchen. Don't hesitate to ask if there's anything else you need."

"Oh… Will you be making lunch? I can help."

"No, please don't worry about it. I'll call you when the food's ready."

Unwilling to hear any objections, Yurie left Miyo to her sewing.

But my needs can wait…

She was becoming a mere leech who couldn't contribute anything herself. Dejected as she was, she couldn't waste the precious free time Yurie had given her. She laid out the torn kimono and threaded a needle. Concentrating on her needlework, she didn't notice that the door wasn't entirely closed and that someone was looking in on her.

It was the evening of her tenth day at Kiyoka's home.

"How did you spend the day? I can't imagine household chores take up all your time," Kiyoka asked her suddenly over dinner.

Miyo had finally grown accustomed to the household. Although she and Kiyoka didn't talk very much, she no longer felt anxious about sharing meals with him twice a day. It might have seemed insignificant, but eating together with a man of such high status took great courage on Miyo's part. It was a considerable obstacle for her to overcome.

When he was out during the day, she passed the time peacefully. The house was small, so she finished the cleaning and laundry before noon at the latest. Food merchants who swung by the house alleviated the need to go grocery shopping, so her afternoons were free. Yurie headed home early in the evening, leaving Miyo alone.

"I, um… I read magazines Yurie let me borrow."

That wasn't the whole truth. She also spent time on needlework, but she didn't want him to ask about it. Had she told him about repairing her old kimonos, he might have thought she was pushing him to buy her new clothes.

It was important to Miyo that Kiyoka and Yurie didn't think badly of her. While she didn't want to lie to them, she did what she could to conceal the truth about her family and her life before she'd arrived at this house. That was her inner conflict.

What did Kiyoka make of her downcast look? He merely nodded with an "Okay" before going quiet until it was almost time to clear the trays.

"I was thinking of going somewhere on my day off."

"I see."

Miyo didn't know why he was telling her that, but she politely showed she was paying attention.

"You haven't left the house since you arrived."

"That's true."

"…Would you like to go out to town?"

What…? She hadn't been expecting this question and didn't know how to answer off the cuff. Her family had refused to send her to a finishing school, so she'd hardly ever left the mansion after completing elementary school. While she'd missed the bustle of the

city and the freedom to go out at first, now she wouldn't know what to do with herself there, what with no money to spend. Sad as it was, she'd found she'd outgrown her excitement for the city during the trip from her family estate to Kiyoka's home.

"I… I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't have any errands in the city, and I couldn't possibly trouble you to take me with you…"

Kiyoka sighed.

"It would be no trouble, and you don't need a reason to go out. I'd like you to keep me company."

"Won't I be in the way?"

"Not in the slightest. You can dress in that kimono you wore on your first day here. Do you have any other concerns?"

She couldn't think of a reason to refuse him now.

"No…"

"Well, it's settled, then. Thank you for the meal."

He got up, his expression blank or perhaps a bit strained, and carried his tray to the kitchen.

I probably annoyed him again.

He'd been generous enough to invite her to go out with him, yet she'd gone and made the conversation awkward. Miyo hung her head. As much as she hated herself for being so inarticulate, she couldn't remember how to have a normal conversation. She'd been perfectly capable of it as a little girl.

Well, it seems we'll be going out together.

Miyo would have to start preparing for the outing to ensure she wouldn't bring him shame or make him uncomfortable. She finished her dinner with a mix of anxiety, worry, and anticipation.

Miyo gazed at a cherry tree. It was a warm spring day, and the single cherry tree in the inner courtyard of the Saimori mansion was resplendent with pale-pink blossoms.

It was yet another dream, but not one of the nightmares that had been tormenting her night after night. She could tell because this tree had been cut down a long time ago. It was planted when her mother, Sumi Usuba, had married Shinichi Saimori, and it withered a year after her death. Since this scene was from the days when Miyo's family still treated her normally, however, this dream wasn't a bad one. But this time there was yet another difference from her usual visions—in her nightmares, she would relive her own memories, but she couldn't have remembered viewing this cherry tree in bloom. It had died when she was only three or four years old, so that much was obvious.

In her dream, she was staring absentmindedly at the tree when suddenly she noticed someone standing beside it. She knew who it was immediately.

Mother…

She had beautiful, long, shiny black hair and was dressed in a pale-pink kimono. Miyo had been told that this was her mother's favorite, and she had treasured this memento of her until her stepmother had snatched it from her.

Sumi looked incredibly delicate, as if she might fade away at any moment. Her kimono matched the color of the cherry blossoms so perfectly that it made her look like a cherry tree sprite.

Miyo had only hazy, indistinct memories of her mother, but she was sure this was her. The woman standing before her was almost the same age as Miyo now, so it felt strange to call her “Mother.”

“__”

Sumi’s well-shaped lips moved. She was looking at Miyo, trying to tell her something, but Miyo was too far to hear her words.

“What…?”

“__”

Try as she might, she wasn’t getting any closer to her mother, so she was still unable to hear her.

“Mother…”

“__”

“What are you trying to tell me?”

Sumi seemed to be repeating something with urgency, but none of it reached Miyo’s ears. The next moment, a sudden gust of wind sent a flurry of cherry blossom petals into the air, causing Miyo to shut her eyes as her hair flailed against her face.

“No, Shinichi, please wait!”

The desperate cry she vaguely recalled must have belonged to her mother. She couldn’t explain it. Nevertheless, she realized that this scene had actually happened in the past.

“You’re wrong about her!”

“What am I wrong about, Sumi?”

This time, it was her father’s voice she heard.

“Miyo is… She is…”

“She is without the Gift. That’s a fact.”

Her father was shouting resentfully that Miyo had never demonstrated an ability to sense Grotesqueries, not even once. Miyo knew from hearsay that children with Spirit-Sight sensed supernatural creatures as early as in infancy. At first, they would catch only an odd glimpse of them now and again; sometimes they wouldn't see anything at all. By the age of five, their Spirit-Sight would develop fully, allowing them to consistently spot Grotesqueries. That was when their skills were finally acknowledged.

However, sometimes a baby's budding awareness of the supernatural would peter out, and they'd never develop Spirit-Sight. That could happen, since small children were naturally more sensitive to the otherworldly. As follows, if they were completely blind to the Grotesqueries when they were very young, it was a strong sign they were Giftless. The few exceptions to this rule were exceedingly rare. Most parents would give up hope at that point and assume their child just didn't have special abilities.

If what Miyo was seeing in this dream had really transpired, that meant her father had first turned his back on her while her mother was still alive.

"Please don't reject your daughter."

"If she were born to a family of commoners, she'd be loved. But to the Saimori house, she is just a disgrace," her father said coldly.

Miyo had been told of her father's kindness toward her when she was little, but now she understood it hadn't been out of love. His tenderness was simply because she'd been a baby. Naturally, he'd felt bitter dejection when the child of the woman he'd been forced to marry in spite of his love for another hadn't fulfilled the familial expectation of inheriting the Gift.

She heard her father walking away. Her mother, whom he'd presumably left behind, spoke quietly in a trembling voice.

“I’m sorry, Miyo. Forgive me for being such a good-for-nothing mother.”

Miyo wanted to apologize to her. It was her fault, after all, for having no talents, for bringing nothing but misery.

“But don’t worry, my sweet girl. In just a few years’ time, you will—”

Huh? The voice in her head suddenly cut off. In her dream, Miyo opened her eyes. The cherry tree was still there as before, but her mother was nowhere to be found. What would happen in a few years’ time? What was her mother trying to tell her? Was she still hoping Miyo would develop Spirit-Sight later on? Miyo left the exquisite dreamworld with questions she could not answer.

The open sliding door let in bright morning light and a pleasant breeze. Miyo sat in front of the mirror, combing her hair with more care than usual. Maybe there wasn’t much point to it, on account of the cheap comb missing a few teeth already, but she hoped that taking more time with it would bring better results. After going through her hair for twice as long as she typically did, she noticed that her hair had indeed acquired a glossy sheen.

Mother was so beautiful… In her dream, she’d had lovely hair, straight and shining. *I wonder if my hair could look like that, too, if I took better care of it…* She examined a strand held between her fingers and sighed. It didn’t seem likely.

Her hair was damaged, and the gaudy kimono she’d arrived in didn’t suit her. The more she looked in the mirror at the mismatch between herself and her outfit, the more despondent she became about going out with Kiyoka.

“Miss Miyo, may I enter?”

“Yes, come in.”

Yurie entered the room, strangely cheerful.

“My, how pretty you look.”

“You’re too kind.”

“Would you like to put on some makeup?”

Miyo froze. Makeup? Kiyoka would probably expect her to wear it, of course, but she didn’t own any.

“I, um… I’m not very good at it…”

“Then I’ll gladly help you with that.”

“B-but I… I don’t have any makeup.”

Miyo shot Yurie a nervous glance but saw that the old lady’s grin had only widened.

“Not to worry. Look, I brought you a makeup kit.”

It was only then that Miyo noticed that Yurie was holding what seemed like a vanity box. *She must have noticed I don’t have much of my own.* In a cottage with a tiny number of occupants, you couldn’t hide anything for long. Thinking that Kiyoka, too, might already know this made her so embarrassed, she wanted to disappear.

“Could you please look this way?”

While Miyo was lost in her anxious ruminations, Yurie energetically got the various makeup items ready. First, she lightly powdered Miyo’s face, then contoured her eyebrows, and lastly chose a subtle shade of red lipstick.

“There, all done.”

Just as she said that, they heard another voice from behind the door.

“I’d like to leave soon.”

“Y-yes, coming! Yurie, thank you so much.”

“It was my pleasure. I hope you enjoy your outing.”

Miyo rushed out of her room without checking her makeup in the mirror. Kiyoka was waiting in the corridor, dressed in a navy-blue kimono with an undyed haori coat over it.

“I’m so sor…um, I mean, thank you for waiting for me.”

“I only just got here. Sorry for rushing you. Shall we be off?”

“Yes.”

This would be her first time out with Kiyoka. She braced herself and followed after him.

“S-so, um…where will we be going today?”

She was already in the car with him, heading toward the city, when she realized he hadn’t told her where he wanted to take her.

“Ah, that’s right—I forgot to tell you. First, we need to stop by my workplace.”

“P-pardon…?!”

His workplace?!

Was he taking her to the headquarters of the Imperial Army? She’d never seen it herself, but from what she knew about it, it was an enormous base with all kinds of military facilities, imposing and heavily guarded. Since she hadn’t mentally prepared herself to visit, her hands started trembling from anxiety.

“Don’t look at me like that. We’re not going to the army base.”

He smiled wryly. Even though he was concentrating on the road, he'd sensed her terror.

"But…isn't that where you work?"

"Not all military personnel work out of the main base. It's a bit far off, but there are many smaller stations throughout the city. The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit is quite different from the other armed forces in many ways, so we have our station in the city, not on the base. It's a small place—there's no need to be so tense."

Even Miyo, with her lack of formal education, had heard about the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit and knew it was a force composed of officers with Spirit-Sight or other supernatural powers. Those people were difficult to come by, and consequently, the unit was rather small. Their station wouldn't be overwhelming, either. She let out a sigh of relief.

"Besides, we're just going there so I can park the car. We won't be staying, so you probably won't even run into any of my subordinates."

"I see."

Cars had only been recently introduced to this country. While they could cover long distances in a short amount of time, the lack of parking spaces was their downside. You couldn't park just anywhere you liked in the capital.

Miyo and Kiyoka chatted away until their first stop came into view. The guard at the entrance let them through without questions when Kiyoka stuck his head out the window. As the commander, he didn't have to show any proof of identification.

It looks like a schoolhouse.

The building that served as the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit's headquarters had Western architectural influence. Both its size and

shape resembled the elementary school Miyo had attended, and it blended in very well with the capital's cityscape. The training grounds, too, reminded Miyo of her school, except that it was uniformed soldiers instead of children who were exercising outdoors.

"All right, let's go."

After Kiyoka parked the car on the grounds, he and Miyo started heading back toward the main gate.

"Huh, is that the commander?" came a voice from behind them.

Kiyoka was none too pleased to see the young officer.

"Godou."

"I thought you were off duty today?"

"I am, yes. I just came here to park my car."

"That explains it."

Godou gave the impression of being carefree and maybe even a bit shallow. As he relaxed his shoulders, a smile brightened his soft features. Then he glanced at Miyo, who startled and took half a step back.

"And who's that? Who're you?"

"She's with me. That's all you need to know."

Kiyoka cut him off unceremoniously, but Godou must have been used to it, because he just shrugged, unperturbed.

"Fine, I'll drop it. Don't forget to come in to work tomorrow, Commander."

"As if I would ever do that. You ought to return to your post, Godou. I'm sure you have something better to do."

"Will do, will do. I'll leave you to it, sir. Later."

Miyo wasn't sure about the proper etiquette but gave him a small nod as he was leaving.

"That was my aide, Godou. Believe it or not, he's a capable Gift-user."

"Oh…"

"Not that he's too keen on work," Kiyoka added with a stern face, clearly annoyed by his subordinate's frivolous attitude.

They didn't meet anyone else on the way to the gate. The car had previously shielded them from the city's hustle and bustle that now engulfed the pair once they were on the street. There, a jarring mix of Japanese and Western aesthetics vied fiercely for space. Beneath tall, modern buildings, the buzzing streets swelled with people. To her own surprise, Miyo felt exhilarated by this unique city atmosphere she hadn't experienced in a very long time.

"Is there anywhere you'd like to go?"

"Huh?"

It hadn't crossed her mind that she would have a choice, so she drew a blank.

"Any stores you'd like to visit?"

"N-no, not really. I'm fine."

She'd assumed she would just be keeping him company. Besides, she'd gone so long without the luxury of wanting anything that she couldn't come up with something on a whim. Kiyoka's expression softened at her nonplussed reaction before he let out a little chuckle. The otherworldly beauty of his smile had her instantly entranced.

"In that case, will you accompany me on my errands?"

"Yes, gladly."

It was late spring, with summer just around the corner. The sunny but mild weather was ideal for a walk. It had been so long since everything had felt fresh to Miyo, and she was taking it all in with eyes wide open. The people in their colorful outfits, the streetcars passing them by, the specialty stores, and the curious-looking buildings. Kiyoka kept glancing back at her over his shoulder, seemingly in a good mood.

"Are you enjoying the city?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm so sorry…"

She was appalled when he pointed out how openly the sights mesmerized her. It was him she should have been paying attention to. *Just like a country bumpkin… The shame! I can't look him in the eye…* She'd been living in this city her whole life yet was acting like she'd just arrived. Her behavior must have embarrassed him.

"You needn't be. Enjoy the sights to your heart's content. I'm not going to tell you off for that, nor will anyone else."

"But…"

How could he really mean it? Walking around with a woman like her, he was probably eyed with incredulousness and ridicule. When she dropped her head in self-doubt, she felt his large hand on her head.

"Don't worry about me. I'm the one who invited you, after all."

"…"

"Right?"

"Yes…"

His touch, his expression, and his tone were very gentle, but somehow they also conveyed absolute authority. Miyo nodded.

"Just make sure not to fall behind and get lost," Kiyoka warned.

“I’ll be careful.”

“Good.”

He’d been walking very slowly, she realized, and had adjusted his pace for her sake. Unaccustomed to such kindness, she felt tears welling up in her eyes. Why did people call him merciless and cruel? He was so caring. If only she was a good match for him—then she’d want to stay with him forever. But, of course, she was worthless. Feelings of self-loathing began to creep into her heart.

“And here we are.”

They’d stopped at a large kimono store. Judging from the style of its signboard and the facade, it had a long history and sold luxury clothing. They went inside. The venue was lined with tatami-mat flooring. Stunning long-sleeve kimonos were displayed on clothing racks, while the shelves held bales of fabric in bright colors, perhaps for summer.

It was Miyo’s first time in a kimono vendor, and she was awestruck.

“It’s so big…”

“Suzushima’s has been my family’s go-to kimono store for generations. I hear they even make kimonos for the emperor.”

“Th-that’s incredible…,” she mumbled artlessly, overwhelmed.

Then she suddenly became self-conscious of what she was wearing, which made her even more hopelessly ill at ease. Although she wasn’t dressed particularly poorly, here in this high-class store, she stuck out like a sore thumb. Most obvious was the color of her kimono, which clashed with its pattern. Her father had probably

selected it at random. While it wasn't a cheap rag, it wasn't what you'd call a quality kimono, either.

"Welcome, Mr. Kudou."

"A pleasure as always."

An elegant older woman—presumably the shop owner—greeted Kiyoka with a polite bow. Despite her modest air, she was undeniably stylish and vibrant at the same time.

"Sir, I hope you don't mind me getting right down to business. I've selected a few items for your consideration based on what you requested. If you would please come this way."

"Very well."

So he was buying a new kimono. She wasn't sure if she was expected to follow him, so she stayed put. A shop clerk noticed and came over, smiling.

"Miss, please allow me to show you around."

"Th-thank you… I'll take a quick look while I wait for you, Mr. Kudou," Miyo said weakly.

"Take your time. If anything catches your eye, let me know, and we'll buy it before we leave," Kiyoka replied before disappearing into the back of the store.

I could never be so presumptuous…

Everything in this store looked terribly expensive, and she couldn't imagine pestering Kiyoka to get her anything like that. To be more specific, she wouldn't be able to bring herself to ask him for any gift, no matter the price. Acutely aware that she didn't belong here, she sighed but nonetheless allowed the clerk to show her the shop's wares to pass the time.

In the Japanese-style room at the back of the store, Kiyoka stood facing Suzushima's owner, Keiko. Between them lay beautiful women's long-sleeve kimonos, covering every inch of available space.

"Tee-hee-hee. I see the time has come for you to buy a lady's kimono, Mr. Kudou."

Kiyoka had known Keiko since he was a boy. Whenever he needed a new kimono, he'd have it tailor-made for him at her store. She'd become something of an acquaintance of his and had come to know many things about him, including not only that he was a stubborn bachelor but also that he hadn't even really had a lover.

"Don't read too deeply into it…"

"Please, there's no need to be so shy. I'm so very glad you've finally brought a lady to my store."

It was true that he'd never bought a kimono for a woman before, but he'd been compelled to do this for Miyo after Yurie had reported her findings to him.

"Miyo was mending her old kimonos the other day…"

When Yurie had brought Miyo the sewing kit, she hadn't been expecting that the girl had needed to stitch up torn old kimonos. Although she'd tried to convince her there was no need for mending, after noticing Miyo's embarrassment about the state of her wardrobe, she'd allowed her to carry on.

Miyo's attire had also puzzled Kiyoka. The kimonos she wore from day to day were so old, you'd think she was the daughter of an impoverished farmer. They differed in color or pattern, but they were all similarly worn out, and he'd felt sorry to see her dressed in them. Eventually, he'd decided to bring her to the kimono store,

even though he'd never felt like buying his previous marriage candidates gifts when they'd pestered him about it. But that didn't mean Miyo was special to him, of course.

"Do you have anything you think would suit her?"

Keiko laughed abruptly at how obviously he was trying to change the topic.

"Heh-heh, I believe so. Delicate colors like this, or these here, would complement her quite well."

Kiyoka nodded, agreeing with Keiko's recommendation. Subtle colors matched the season as well. Sky blue, spring green, or perhaps light purple would be good, too. Even with her honest advice, Kiyoka had trouble making up his mind until he happened to glance up at a kimono Keiko hadn't yet pointed out to him.

"How about that one?" he asked.

"That's a very good choice, too, but I'm afraid that by the time we could get it ready for your lady, the color would be out of season."

It was a long-sleeve kimono in an arresting pale pink. Yet, somehow the delicate colors also had an eye-catching vibrance. *Would Miyo look good in this?* He tried to picture her wearing it…but quickly banished the image from his mind, abashed. *What on earth am I doing?* There was no special meaning to this. None at all.

Miyo would have been disgusted if she knew he was picturing her in his mind like this. How shameful of him to let his thoughts wander in that direction. A man of his age ought to have better self-control.

"I'd like you to tailor this one for her."

"Oh, are you set on this one, then?"

He handed Keiko the pale-pink kimono.

“Yes. Even if you can’t finish it by the time spring ends, she can wear it again next year. Could you also make her a few kimonos from these fabrics? The price doesn’t matter.”

“Of course, sir.”

Kiyoka chose several different colors from among the fabrics Keiko recommended.

“She’ll also need sashes and other accessories in matching patterns. Can I leave that to you?”

“Absolutely. Oh, and by the way…” Keiko clapped her hands and fetched a palm-size box that had been set aside. “You wanted to take this with you today, sir?”

He lifted the lid to check the contents. Finding the item inside exactly as requested, Kiyoka nodded.

“Yes, thank you. Please add this to the kimonos, and I’ll settle the amount due all together.”

“Very well. One more thing, Mr. Kudou…”

“What is it?”

He carefully tucked the box away inside his kimono before looking back at Keiko. She opened her eyes wide and met his with an intense gaze.

“You must hold on to that girl!”

“Excuse me?”

“She is what you call a diamond in the rough. Her hair, skin, face, and all her features have the potential to shine with a little polish! With some more care and attention, she can blossom into a beauty on par with your handsome looks.”

Keiko had an eye for those things; it was her job to doll people up and make them look pretty by dressing them in beautiful clothes. Not that Kiyoka hadn't noticed Miyo's prettiness himself.

"Your purchases today are only the beginning. Don't spare the girl your love and financial resources, and soon enough…"

"Yes?"

"…you will revel in the delight that only dressing up a beautiful girl can bring!"

She seemed to honestly believe so, too.

"Goodness, Keiko, I thought I made it clear that I'm not in love with the girl."

He sighed at the store owner, who was around the same age as his mother and was getting so excited that her eyes sparkled like a happy little girl's. Yet strangely, some part of him wanted to do exactly as Keiko had insisted.

"Thank you. That's all for today."

He chose not to dwell too deeply on it.

When he returned to the store floor where Miyo was waiting, he found her riveted over something. He followed her gaze to a pale-pink long-sleeve kimono, quite similar to the one he'd just chosen for her.

That look on her face…

There was longing and sadness in it, as if the kimono was something she wanted very much but knew she couldn't have.

"Mother…"

She whispered so quietly, he barely caught it, unaware he'd come back and was standing right behind her. Confused, he waited a bit before speaking to her.

"You like this kimono?"

"Oh! I—I wasn't… I wasn't thinking of asking for it, nothing like that!"

"…"

"It's just that it's very similar to one I had been keeping as a memento of my mother… I no longer have it. It made me miss her."

"I see."

He wondered what had happened to that heirloom kimono, but more than anything, he was relieved she didn't say that she didn't like how it looked.

"Did you spot anything else you'd like?"

"N-no, nothing that I really need."

Instead of asking for something, she would humbly conceal her needs and wants. He hadn't told her the purpose of this shopping trip that day because he'd assumed his act of generosity would mortify her, and her reaction now convinced him he'd been right.

"Shall we go, then?"

"Yes."

"Please come again!"

Keiko and her store staff saw them off, bowing politely.

"Do you like it?"

"Y-yes. It's deliciously sweet."

After the kimono vendor, they stopped at a Japanese café for a snack. Kiyoka told Miyo to order anything she wanted regardless of the cost, but she couldn't make up her mind about what to get or even about whether to get anything at all. In the end, she had to give up her reservations, unable to bear Kiyoka's intense gaze, and went with the staff's inexpensive suggestion of *anmitsu*, agar jelly with sweet red bean paste and fruit. Unfortunately, she was so anxious about sharing the table with Kiyoka, sitting closer to him than they did at his home, and about the curious looks the other customers were giving him that she could barely taste her dessert.

Everyone's staring at us…

It'd been like this outside on the streets, too. Kiyoka naturally drew people's attention without doing anything out of the ordinary. *Not that it's a surprise.* He was a strikingly beautiful young man, with hair so phenomenally stunning that many women would be envious. His movements were graceful, spellbinding. Even from a distance, his enchanting presence turned heads.

That was why they constantly attracted stares, not to mention the jealous glares that Miyo endured from other girls. They must have been wondering why on earth this gorgeous man was with such a plain-looking girl. It was something straight out of a love story, like the one Miyo had recently read in one of the magazines she'd borrowed from Yurie. The onlookers' jealousy was unfounded, though, so Miyo felt an urge to explain herself and apologize to the other women. *I'm just keeping him company today—I swear I'm not his sweetheart. He'll get rid of me soon, and then you're free to try your luck.*

These thoughts kept swirling in her head until Kiyoka's good-humored expression made them fade away. It was strange to see him in such high spirits, since he seemed either emotionless or

somewhat cross most of the time. She was finding this outing quite nerve-racking.

"You don't look like you're enjoying it."

"N-no, I am…"

The red bean paste, rice flour dumplings, and agar jelly were rare treats for her. They were definitely delicious. *I'm sure they're nice…*

"…You really never smile."

His offhand remark shocked her. She hadn't considered until then that it must have been awfully unpleasant for him to be sitting with someone who didn't smile at all or brighten up in appreciation of the dessert he was treating her to.

"I'm…so sorry."

"Oh, I wasn't reproaching you. I've just never seen you smile, and I'm curious to see what it looks like."

Why would he care? She unconsciously tilted her head to the side.

"You are a strange man, Mr. Kudou."

"…"

"Oh, I-I'm so sorry. That was disrespectful. I shouldn't have said that. Please forgive me."

She couldn't believe she'd let something so rude slip out of her mouth. This little outing, filled with so many exciting sights, had made her forget her place for a moment, so she'd thoughtlessly spoken her mind. Kaya would have never committed such a faux pas. Although she was always mean to Miyo, she was clever enough to avoid saying something that might offend a person who mattered.

Miyo felt a mix of guilt and disappointment in herself.

"I'm not upset. You don't need to recoil like that."

“But what I said was—”

“The way things are currently going, we’ll soon be married. We should be able to speak our mind with each other. I far prefer honesty to apologies.”

Miyo froze again. *We’ll soon be married…* He must not have known about her lack of supernatural abilities and education, about her unfitness to be his wife. Even if her inadequacies hadn’t yet become apparent, he was bound to discover them sooner or later, since she would be invited along to mingle with the social elite as his wife.

She gently set down the spoon. This day had been filled with wonderful gifts from Kiyoka. He’d taken her out for a lovely cup of tea, bought her a dessert, and showed her around the city. And though she counted her blessings, if she really cared about him, she ought to have told him now that the marriage would be impossible, that she was unworthy. *And yet…* A desire had started to take root in her heart. A yearning to live with him just a little longer and to support him in any way she could. That was why she didn’t say anything to him, despite the futility of her selfish wish.

Learning that he wanted to hear her thoughts rather than her apologies made her so, so very happy. *I’ll take any punishment you want to mete out to me, so…*

She didn’t want it to end just yet.

“I… I understand. I’ll make sure to be open with you.”

“Good.”

When Miyo had first laid eyes on him, she wouldn’t have guessed that one day his soft smile would make her chest tighten like this. She wanted just a little more of this happiness, and then she swore she’d tell him the truth about herself.

Kiyoka hadn't asked her why her expression suddenly clouded over. He hadn't asked because he was certain he'd understand her before long.

He'd pretended he hadn't noticed the change in her as he paid for their tea and desserts, and then they left the café. Afterward, they strolled a bit more, stopped by a bookstore, and went to a park where azaleas were in full bloom. Miyo reacted to everything with fresh wonder, which made her fascinating to watch. In fact, Kiyoka was enjoying her company so much more than he expected. He even considered making a habit of spending his days off like this. By the time they'd gotten back to the car after dinner at a popular Western-style restaurant, the sun was setting.

"Thank you so much for today, Mr. Kudou," Miyo told him when they got back, strained again.

He thought they'd broken the ice at least a bit that day, but it seemed Miyo wasn't going to forgo her humble attitude toward him anytime soon.

"Thank you, too, and apologies for making you follow me around on my errands. Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Yes, very much so."

"I'm glad to hear that. We'll have to do this again."

"…That would be lovely."

Kiyoka thought of the little box he had concealed in his kimono, wondering if this was the right time to give it to her. *No, it can wait.* He'd rather not give it to her at that precise moment, or else she might feel as if he was pressuring her. It could wait until later in the evening. He'd leave it in front of her room while she was in the bath. Although she seemed reluctant to accept gifts, she couldn't ignore something left by her door.

After placing the gift, he waited for her reaction in the living room, sipping tea. He heard her exit the bathroom and walk back to her room. Not long after, she came out in search of him.

"Mr. Kudou…wh-what is this?"

She was dressed in a *yukata*, her cheeks slightly flushed—whether it was from excitement or simply from having been in a hot bath, he couldn't tell.

"It's yours. Take it."

"Were you the one…who left it for me?"

Miyo took the lid off and hesitantly peered inside the box. It held a comb made of boxwood and exquisitely decorated with flower carvings. It was certainly a pricey item, but there was no denying that a quality comb made all the difference with hair. He'd simply had to purchase this for Miyo—out of purely practical concerns, of course.

"That's a good question."

There was one little problem with the gift—namely that offering a comb to a lady was customarily taken as a marriage proposal. It perhaps wasn't the best of choices for a first present. Thus, he'd been unable to give it to her openly out of concern she would misconstrue his intentions.

"I couldn't possibly accept such an expensive gift."

"Don't worry about it."

"But—"

"Just take it."

"It *is* from you…isn't it…?"

"…"

"Mr. Kudou?"

“D-don’t dwell too deeply on it. Do what you like with it.”

There was really no need for so many questions, he felt. Kiyoka furtively glanced at Miyo—and his eyes widened in surprise.

“Well… If you insist, I shall accept it. Thank you very much, Mr. Kudou.”

A delicate, bashful smile graced her lips. It was like a bud beginning to open, like an icebound landscape thawing in spring, pure and beautiful.

“I’ll treasure it.”

“Please do.”

His lips and his voice quivered. What was this strange feeling? Was it wonder? Excitement? Delight? Or all of that at once? There was a simpler word for it, though: love.

Several days later, Kiyoka was holed up in his office at the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit’s base well past his required hours. He was scrutinizing a report a trusted officer had delivered to him. A report on Miyo Saimori.

Kiyoka had contacted an informant and requested as detailed an account as possible on the Saimori household. The thorough investigation had taken some time. Neither the current nor former servants had been willing to talk.

“It’s a common story, really,” muttered the informant, scratching his cheek as the corners of his eyebrows lowered in an expression of pity.

After Miyo’s mother passed away, her father had married again. Since the new wife’s daughter had proved to be more talented, Miyo

was cast aside and became victim to domestic abuse. Those situations unfortunately happened often, especially in Gifted families, where being born with or without the Gift defined a family member's status. Many of those families were unscrupulous in their treatment of the Giftless, whom they considered failures.

According to the report, the Saimori family's conduct toward Miyo had been particularly cruel. Kiyoka thought back to her reaction to the pale-pink kimono in the store, when she'd remarked that it resembled one of her mother's, which she'd kept as a memento until losing it. How had she reacted when the only thing she'd had to remember her mother by had been snatched away from her? Her stepmother and half sister had abused her while her father had turned the other cheek, and the servants hadn't extended a helping hand, either. Miyo had been all alone. That explained why she volunteered with the cooking, laundry, and cleaning at Kiyoka's house. This daughter of the Saimori family hadn't been raised as such. Instead, her family had regarded her as a lowly servant they could exploit as they pleased. They hadn't even provided meals for her. That was why she'd become this unsmiling, famished-looking waif dressed in old, threadbare clothes. Her family had done that to her.

Kiyoka made a fist and crumpled the papers he was holding. He was both infuriated at the people who'd tormented the poor girl and overcome with remorse over the harsh words he'd spat at her on her first days at his house. Though he hadn't known back then that she was different from the arrogant women he'd grown accustomed to, that was still no excuse.

But now I know everything. Including the fact that Miyo didn't have the Gift. Not even Spirit-Sight. He wagered that she thought her chances of becoming his wife were hopeless because of that. She was so reserved with him because she was primed for rejection.

However, Kiyoka didn't care whether his wife had supernatural abilities or was as normal as they came. In fact, the women he'd considered before hadn't all been Gifted. Some had been daughters of well-to-do merchants or politicians.

His father, the former head of his family, fielded all of Kiyoka's potential brides, and he wasn't particular about finding his son someone who possessed the Gift. As for Kiyoka, he simply wanted someone who would want to stay by his side. He wanted someone who would genuinely enjoy living in his forest cottage as his wife, not simply relish his status or wealth. And Miyo would do that. He had no intention of letting go of her.

Something else in the report had also caught his attention. Miyo's mother's maiden name was Usuba.

Families with the Gift, like the Saimoris and the Kudous, had long served as the emperor's retainers. Their powers were indispensable for combating the Grotesqueries, which were invisible to ordinary people. Since their special abilities were also extremely valuable in battles against humans, they'd always played a significant role in suppressing riots and keeping peace within the empire.

The Gift came in many different forms. It could be the power of telekinesis, conjuring fire, manipulating wind or water, teleporting, walking in midair, or seeing through obstacles, among numerous others. It was also not unusual for a Gifted person to have multiple powers.

The Usuba family's Gift was in a category of its own, however, and was far more unusual and far more dangerous in the way it worked. Their powers enabled them to manipulate the minds of others. They could alter memories, invade dreams, read thoughts—and those were the least threatening of their talents. Among the more terrifying ones were the power to strip a person of their will and turn

them into a puppet and the ability to drive a person to insanity with illusions.

Cognizant of the danger their Gift represented, the Usubas realized it could even pose a threat to national security. For this reason, they led secretive existences, taking all measures necessary to avoid drawing attention to themselves. They lived according to restrictive rules unique to their line, guarded family secrets, and avoided intermarriage with other Gifted families so that their Gift would remain confined to their bloodline. Past emperors would even have them assassinated occasionally rather than risk their powers being used toward malicious ends.

With all this history in mind, it was bizarre that Sumi Usuba would have married into the Saimori family. Kiyoka had a bad feeling about the circumstances that led to the union. He let out a sigh.

Wedding Miyo would not be to his disadvantage. Far from that, it would be in his best interest. Yet, her mysterious family lineage perplexed him. Even with his influence, Kiyoka had been unable to find any way of locating or contacting the Usubas. His informants had turned up nothing.

“They really are elusive…”

He flipped through the pages of the report, many of his questions still without answers.

Kiyoka had been so preoccupied, he’d lost track of time. Only when the sun began to set did he get ready to leave for the day. He checked in with the night shift, then left the station. Come to think of it, he’d been leaving much earlier these days than he used to. In times past, it hadn’t been unusual for him to spend the night at his office, and he would rarely make it home while the sun was still

above the horizon. Everything had changed with Miyo's arrival. Seeing her at the entrance when he came home set his mind strangely at ease, and he liked to get off work in time for dinner with her.

I'm not acting like myself…

Since their outing in the city, his emotions were becoming ever more unmanageable. Apprehensively, he pondered if Keiko's prediction at Suzushima's was already becoming reality. It was all too easy for him to picture himself spoiling Miyo with gifts, forever chasing this warm feeling in his chest.

Until he'd met her, Kiyoka hadn't had very good experiences with women. Even when he was only a young boy, many girls had aggressively pursued him, which had only put him off further. His mother had been an object of his ire throughout his entire life, what with her tempestuous temper and distasteful obsession with flaunting their wealth. As a university student, Kiyoka had given in to peer pressure and had tried dating a few girls, only to have ended up detesting women's company even more. Ultimately, he'd found himself growing irritated at the wheedling voices of their family's maids, along with the overbearing smell from the copious amounts of facial powder they applied.

Having matured since then, he no longer found shallow politeness as irksome, but he still preferred not to associate with women outside of longtime acquaintances like Yurie and Keiko. Although he'd tried to carefully avoid attracting female attention, that had proved next to impossible while he'd been living in his family mansion. His family employed many maids, so he'd had no respite from their amorous glances. That was why he moved to his small dwelling in the woods. If someone told him a few years earlier that he would be happily living together with a young woman there, he would have laughed at them for making such an insane suggestion.

Kiyoka smirked at this thought before he suddenly stopped in his tracks, detecting a threatening presence.

Something's following me…

He sensed countless pairs of eyes boring into him. Despite the lack of audible footsteps or even breathing, something was definitely there. Whatever it was, it wasn't human.

Who is this fool trying to spy on me?

A Gift-user must have sent this strange entity after him, but who would be so harebrained as to pull that trick on Kiyoka Kudou? Or perhaps they weren't stupid, but rather so confident in their power that they didn't fear the possibility of repercussions.

Kiyoka hadn't left the base yet. No one else was around. The officers standing guard at the gate didn't possess Spirit-Sight, and the base lacked a protective barrier, so nonhuman entities could easily slip in. Those flaws were entirely deliberate—they turned the base into a trap where the Gifted could dispose of Grotesqueries outside the public eye.

"You went through all that trouble for nothing."

Moving his fingertips slightly, Kiyoka dragged the creature out of the shadows. Numerous palm-size scraps of paper hovered in the air in a shape that was vaguely birdlike, vaguely human. He'd bound the creature with his power so that it was frozen to the spot. Unfortunately, it seemed whoever had dispatched it had used it as eyes only. The creature lacked the ability to speak, so Kiyoka wouldn't be able to learn who'd sent it.

"Enough of this nonsense."

As he turned away from it indifferently, it burst into inescapable blue flames before burning up into nothingness. Kiyoka was hailed as

the best Gift-user of his generation, owing to his ability to activate multiple powers at once without any difficulty.

That was hardly worth my time.

Nevertheless, he wondered who was behind it and felt a fleeting sense of unease in the back of his mind. He got into his car and drove home.

CHAPTER 3

A Gift for My Fiancé

After seeing off Kiyoka as usual that morning, Miyo intercepted Yurie, who was about to wash the laundry in the garden.

"Can I help you with anything, miss?"

"I was hoping to get your advice about something."

"Oh?" Yurie smiled at her amicably. "It would be my pleasure."

She looked very happy indeed. Miyo wouldn't say more until they went back into the house and sat opposite each other in the living room.

"You see, I would like to give Mr. Kudou a gift."

"My!"

This had been on Miyo's mind since the day Kiyoka had given her that expensive comb. And his presents hadn't stopped there; he'd also given her a bottle of camellia oil for her hair. She felt she owed him for having her in his house as well. While she had thanked him from the bottom of her heart, words alone hadn't fully expressed her gratitude. She wanted to reciprocate with a gift of her own but didn't know what would be appropriate and was also extremely limited in what she could get him. A present that was neither expensive nor valuable might have only upset him. No matter how much she'd racked her brain for an idea, she couldn't come up with anything, so she decided to seek Yurie's advice.

"I wonder what would make him happy…," Miyo said.

She did, in fact, have a little money that her father had given her when he'd sent her away, but she was saving it for a rainy day. Suppressing a sigh, she gazed at Yurie pleadingly.

“I don’t have much money, I’m afraid. Not enough to buy anything decent for him.”

“Hmm, I see. In that case, I think something he would be able to use every day would be good.”

“Right.”

“Your handiwork, perhaps.”

“Maybe…”

She’d also considered that option. If she couldn’t afford to buy a suitable gift, it stood to reason she would have to make one, but a refined man such as Kiyoka who grew up in a wealthy family might think a handmade gift too crude. Of course, you could never be certain a recipient would enjoy their gift, but she desperately wanted to repay even just a modicum of the happiness he’d given her since she’d moved into his home. When she explained this to Yurie, the old woman’s smile widened.

“You have a very good heart. Don’t worry, Young Master won’t look down on a handmade gift. In fact, I’m sure he’d like anything you make for him.”

“Oh, I’m not so sure…”

“Trust me.”

Yurie’s confidence put Miyo at ease. Since she’d practically raised him, the old woman knew Kiyoka through and through.

“But what could I make for him?”

“Well, if you’re looking for inspiration, I might have just the thing!”

Yurie hurried out of the room and returned with a book.

“You may be able to find something here.”

It was a craft project book for schoolgirls with instructions for producing various everyday items.

Yes, I might be able to make something like this, she thought, leafing through the book. The projects used kimono fabric scraps and didn't seem too time-consuming. She was planning to tell Kiyoka the whole truth about herself soon, but not before she'd given him a gift. That meant she couldn't afford to push back her confession by getting absorbed in crafting something elaborate that had a chance of failure.

"Let me know if you decide to put together something from this book. I'd be happy to help you with it."

"Thank you."

Miyo put the book away and spent the morning doing housework with Yurie. When they were done, she returned to her room to examine the projects in more detail.

"They all look so pretty."

The book featured beautiful hand-drawn illustrations and easy-to-follow explanations of how to build each of the gorgeous accessories. Excitement stirred in her chest just browsing the pages.

"The drawstring pouch is very easy to make, but a handkerchief might be good, too."

There were so many ideas for little gifts. Unable to settle on something, she kept turning the pages until something caught her attention.

"I like this…"

The project she was looking at was a *kumihimo*, a braided cord composed of colorful threads. As Miyo gazed at the illustrations with admiration, it dawned on her that any of the example cords in the

book would suit Kiyoka. Not only could she afford this project, but it would undoubtedly make a practical gift.

This is it.

While she wasn't confident in her ability to braid a cord as elegantly as in the pictures, nothing else in the book called out to her quite like this. She found Yurie and showed her the project; the old woman praised her choice. Miyo would need to go into town to buy the necessary supplies, so she asked Kiyoka for permission that evening.

"Mr. Kudou, would you mind if I went out for a bit sometime soon?"

"…Why? Is there something you need?"

She couldn't tell from his flat tone if he was disinterested or worried about her going out alone when she was so unused to the city.

"Yes, I need to buy something in person. Would that be…too much trouble?"

"No, of course not. Do you want to go by yourself?"

"I was thinking of tagging along with Yurie in the afternoon."

A solo shopping trip was a daunting prospect for Miyo, so she'd asked Yurie if she could accompany her, to which the old lady had gleefully agreed.

"It's not too dangerous?"

"I think I'll be fine… You need not worry."

She nodded, trying to appear confident.

"…Could I join you?" Kiyoka asked.

He furrowed his brow. Although it was nice of him to worry so much about her, she didn't want him to know what she was buying. Neither would it be appropriate for her to trouble him with her personal errand when he was so busy.

"Um… Not this time, no. I'll be fine, I promise."

"As you wish."

He sighed, and for a moment, she wondered if she caught a hint of disappointment in his eyes. She clearly must have been mistaken.

"Be careful in the city. Don't talk to strangers."

"…Even I know how to keep safe, Mr. Kudou."

She thought he was being overprotective, as if she were a child. It would be a very short shopping trip, since she only needed some inexpensive cotton threads. Plus, Yurie would be with her, so Miyo didn't see any danger in venturing into town for a bit. In fact, she was excited at the prospect, and she was looking forward to selecting the threads—something she'd never done before—and braiding them into a pretty rope. The project she'd settled on could be used as a hair tie, the perfect gift for a man with long hair.

On the morning of the day when she planned to go shopping, Kiyoka earnestly handed her a small palm-size pouch.

"What is this…?"

"An amulet to keep you safe. Take it with you today."

"Oh, th-thank you."

It was an amulet you could buy at any old shrine. Miyo tucked it behind her sash, thinking that he was simply overreacting. She'd be gone for only a couple of hours.

“Don’t forget to take it with you. Make sure to keep it on you until you get back.”

“I will.”

“Do you promise?”

“Y-yes.”

His concern was so disarming that she couldn’t help but smile a little. Flustered, she quickly covered her mouth. Kiyoka frowned and huffed with resignation before grabbing his suitcase from her and leaving without another word.

The atmosphere in the manor was particularly unpleasant as of late. In fact, Kouji Tatsuishi had never felt so miserable. This partially stemmed from Kouji’s father, the head of the estate, who was constantly in a rotten mood. Kouji would hear shouting or something being slammed or broken in anger almost every time he passed his father’s study. Though his father was incensed that things hadn’t gone his way, in all honesty, Kouji was the real victim here.

His older brother, who refused to show sympathy for their father because he thought it was none of his business, had taken to sarcastically commenting about their old man having lost it. Kouji’s mother, on the other hand, had shut herself up in her room and was refusing to speak with anyone. Meanwhile, the servants were walking on eggshells out of fear of incurring their master’s wrath, which only added tension to the air. Kouji was on edge the whole time.

People often told him he was a calm and collected young man, and although it was true he avoided conflicts and rarely lost his temper, that didn’t mean he never angered.

“Kouji, can I borrow you for a while? I have some shopping to do.”

Not this again. His fiancée's whining was getting on his nerves. While he was cross with his father, the mere thought of having to live together with this woman for decades made him physically ill.

Ever since he was little, Kouji had had a crush on someone—Miyo. She was kind and quiet yet also resilient, and she had withstood all the abuse her family subjected her to. There was this light inside her that drew him in. On occasions when he would find her vulnerable and on the verge of tears, he would feel an urge to protect her in every fiber of his being.

Miyo was the oldest daughter in the Saimori household, whereas Kouji was the second son of the Tatsuishis. Their families had reasonably good relations, so it had seemed well within the realm of possibility that he would marry her one day. But it had all gone wrong.

The bride the Saimoris had bequeathed hadn't been Miyo but her cruel half sister. To make matters worse, Miyo had been sent far away, and he wouldn't even be able to see her.

As if that wasn't soul crushing enough, Kouji later learned that although his father had requested that the Saimoris offer Miyo over Kaya, he'd wanted her to wed his firstborn over Kouji. The way they treated her like merchandise instead of a person disgusted him. In his mind, his family was just as despicable as the sadistic Saimoris.

"You want to go shopping? Fine, I'll go with you."

In spite of all that, Kouji smiled at his fiancée. He refused to allow his deep-seated disgust to rise to the surface, instead acting like the pleasant young man everyone took him for. The reason he hid behind this mask was simple. Were he to spurn his prideful fiancée, Kaya and her mother, Kanoko, would make Miyo the target of their vengeance, and he couldn't bear the thought of anything bad happening to her.

Instead, he kept a close watch on the Saimori household for any sign that the only person he cared for had come to harm.

Only I can protect Miyo.

Suppressing his aversion, he strengthened his resolve and approached Kaya.

The rather narrow streets were packed, so Miyo was careful not to get separated from Yurie. As planned, they'd gone into the city together. Currently, they were a few blocks away from the stylish main street and its modern buildings. This area was a cluster of old-fashioned stores.

It was a thirty-minute walk from the house, so they'd had no trouble getting there without a car. To be precise, however, it had taken them forty minutes, since Miyo had let Yurie set a pace that would be comfortable. The elderly woman had led the way to a craft supplies store.

Although Miyo had regularly sewn since she'd been lowered to the status of a household servant, she'd been able to use only leftover threads and scraps of cloth. This was her first time in a fabric store.

"Oh my goodness!"

Before them stretched rows upon rows of threads and fabrics in different colors and patterns, needles, scissors, and all sorts of craft tools and materials. The store was quiet and peaceful yet wonderfully bursting with color. Miyo's heart leaped with joy. As in a general store, the clientele ranged from older women to cheerful schoolgirls browsing wares with interest.

"Now, shall we take a look at the threads?"

"Yes, let's do that."

What colors did Kiyoka like? Or rather, what colors would look good on him?

I don't think he would want anything garish.

A brighter, more vividly colored cord would stand out more against his fair hair, but anything overly flashy like strong yellows or reds was best avoided. By contrast, indigo blue would almost match him *too* well and leave a bland, underwhelming impression. Plus, it was too similar to the black cord he normally used for his hair.

"I just don't know what to choose…"

As Miyo puzzled over her choices, Yurie watched her with a smile. There was a special joy to be had in taking the time to carefully consider what to buy. This was especially true for Miyo, who'd never thought she would be in a position to craft a gift for someone. Her past life had consisted solely of meekly following orders and enduring abuse. It surprised her how happy she felt at the prospect of making someone else smile. Even if this new life of hers would only be brief, she was immensely grateful that Kiyoka had offered her a chance at happiness. A smile came to her lips as she inspected the various threads on offer.

By the time she'd picked her strings of choice, it was almost half past eleven. They wouldn't make it home before noon. Miyo paid for the threads, relieved that they were within her modest budget, and left the store with Yurie.

"I'm glad you found what you needed."

"Me too. I can't wait to set to work on the cord."

The colors she'd chosen felt just right, and she was very eager to put the cord together and give it to Kiyoka. But perhaps her gift would be unwelcome, considering she was an amateur and would be constructing it from cheap strings. What would Kiyoka say when she

gave him the handmade cord? Miyo's pulse quickened as she tried to imagine his reaction. A soft, warm sensation filled her chest, and she felt as if she were walking on clouds.

"Oh, I nearly forgot!"

"What's the matter, Yurie?"

The older woman stopped suddenly.

"I need to buy salt. Miss, could you wait here for me a short while?"

"You're getting salt?"

Then Miyo remembered they were indeed running low. The order they'd put in with the door-to-door merchant had gotten delayed, so they'd been almost out of salt for some time. Fortunately, Yurie had realized just in time that there was a grocery store nearby.

"I won't be long."

"Perhaps I should go with you?"

"No, no, please wait here."

The old lady joked that she couldn't have Miyo steal more of her work by shopping for groceries, and then she was gone. Miyo hesitated, uncertain whether to follow, but by the time she decided to do just that, she could no longer make Yurie out in the crowd. She went to stand under a lamppost so as not to be in anyone's way. Innumerable people passed her by. Now that she was alone, her previous excitement quickly dwindled. *Why do I feel so helpless?*

While everyone else was walking somewhere with a sense of purpose, only she was standing still by her lonesome. It made her anxious. Was Yurie coming back yet? Miyo looked toward the store she thought the servant had gone into, but it was too far away to see

anything, so she gave up and continued to wait while staring at the ground. Then she heard a voice.

"My, if it isn't Miyo!"

"!"

A chill ran down her spine. *It can't be her…* But there was no mistaking that sickeningly sweet voice that made her tense up whenever she heard it. Why hadn't it occurred to her that she might run into her here? The din of the street gave way as the sound of blood pulsating in her ears grew louder and louder.

"K-Kaya…"

Miyo turned to find Kouji and Kaya, with her brilliant smile, standing right behind her. Kaya's beauty had grown more striking in the time since Miyo had seen her. She'd donned vivid and eye-catching attire as usual, a peach-colored unlined kimono adorned with a lily pattern that was perfect for early summer. Her elegant and refined gestures immediately identified her as a daughter of the nobility, drawing the attention of passersby. So pure was her smile that all the men who glanced at her were instantly enchanted. But Miyo knew better than anyone else that this outwardly immaculate girl was actually a viper.

"Tee-hee, what a surprise! I didn't think for a moment that I would find you in the city. Who would've imagined you were still alive!"

In other words, she'd expected Miyo to have died in a gutter somewhere by now. Despite Kaya's gentle smile, her eyes held nothing but scorn. Anyone watching them out of earshot, however, would have mistaken it for a heartwarming scene of a rich lady generously making conversation with an impoverished commoner. With her beauty, high-class image, and angelic voice, she deceived people with ease.

“Judging from your pitiful appearance, Mr. Kudou has abandoned you, and you’re now wandering the streets? My poor sister, how low you’ve fallen.”

“N-no… That’s not…”

Miyo could hardly speak, mind blank and mouth dry.

“Kaya, leave her alo—”

Kouji looked as if he was about to step in between them.

“You stay out of this, Kouji.”

Kaya cut him off sharply without even turning to face him, that sweet smile still plastered on her visage. She wouldn’t let him spoil her fun tormenting Miyo. They were in public, so Miyo didn’t think Kaya would go so far as to physically attack her, but nevertheless, the fear ingrained in her from years of abuse made her shrink back. Her only way of dealing with bullying was to make herself look small and bear it until it was over.

“It couldn’t have gone any other way, could it? Mr. Kudou would never marry a nobody like you. It’s obvious he wouldn’t have kept you. But look on the bright side—you’re still alive!”

“…”

“Or perhaps you wish you were dead after what’s been done to you? I can’t even imagine what sort of things you’ve gone through.”

Kaya erupted in giggles. Mocking Miyo again after such a long dry spell put her in an excellent mood. Clinging to Kouji, she guffawed at Miyo, who was shaking and staring at the ground.

“Kaya, that’s enough. Let’s just go.”

“Didn’t I tell you to be quiet, Kouji? Miyo, if you’re in dire straits, I might consider sparing you some loose change if you crawl on the ground and beg for it.”

“I… I…”

She wanted to say something back. When she was living in the Saimori household, she hadn’t been able to defend herself. Now, however, she was no longer bound by their rules. Whatever happened down the line, she would never be going back there. Now all she wanted was to voice the grievances that had built up in her heart over years of mistreatment, to throw it all back at Kaya. But Miyo still found it impossible to oppose her.

“Cat got your tongue? I see you’re still as inarticulate as ever.”

“I… I’m sorry…”

Miyo was bitterly disappointed in herself. She thought she’d begun to change after Kiyoka had kept telling her to stop being so apologetic, but seeing her half sister was enough to make her shake with fright and hang her head. This terror controlled her, and she was powerless against it. Clenching her fists until her knuckles turned white, her vision blurred. The walls she’d built around her heart had become brittle from exposure to Kiyoka’s and Yurie’s kindness, and now they finally gave.

Tears welled up in her eyes. *I mustn’t cry…* She couldn’t let Kaya see how deeply her words had cut. She couldn’t give her the satisfaction.

“Miss Miyo.”

Miyo turned back in surprise to find Yurie, returned from shopping.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting so long. I see you have company?”

“Um… They’re…”

“Good afternoon. Are you Miyo’s companion? I’m Kaya Saimori. It’s so nice to see that my sister has a friend.”

Kaya flashed a warm smile at Yurie, who was eyeing her dubiously. No one would suspect Kaya of being anything but a gentle-mannered girl if they saw her like this. She was going to win Yurie over and turn her against Miyo. Maybe she'd do that with Kiyoka, too. *No…anything but that…* But how could Miyo stop her? She frantically tried to conjure up a solution, but nothing came to mind. Kaya was so superior in every regard that Miyo was always bound to lose to her. She felt as though a dark chasm were remorselessly swallowing her up… But she was wrong. Yurie gently placed her hand on Miyo's hunched back.

"My name is Yurie. Miss Miyo Saimori's companion? I'm nothing of the sort. She is betrothed to my master."

The warmth radiating from the old woman's hand made Miyo breathe a little easier.

"She's to marry your master?"

Kaya opened her eyes wide in astonishment.

"That's right. She's going to wed Mr. Kiyoka Kudou."

"What?!"

Yurie announced this with dignity, her voice strong and proud. It knocked Kaya off her stride.

"Oh, is that so? I didn't think Mr. Kudou would be satisfied with my sister. My, what a charitable man. Or perhaps she's merely piqued his curiosity? You simply can't trust all the rumors you hear about city folk, can you now?"

Kaya concealed her expression behind the long sleeve of her kimono while she regained her composure. She wouldn't let her mask of perfection drop. At least she wasn't so bold as to continue openly harassing her sister in front of Yurie.

“Dear sister, it was lovely to see you. I’m afraid we must be on our way.”

She smiled pleasantly while her eyes remained cold, interlaced her arm with Kouji’s, and then walked away with him.

Miyo finally let out the breath she’d been holding. The tension in her body started to ease.

“Shall we head back, miss?”

“Yes, let’s…”

Miyo couldn’t bear to face Yurie, who’d spoken of her so kindly. The older woman must have witnessed at least part of the exchange, seen Miyo pathetically taking the abuse without fighting back. And that must have made her doubt whether Miyo was really suitable for Kiyoka. All the harsh things Kaya had spat at her were things Miyo already knew. She regretted not having been able to stand up for herself, but Kaya hadn’t left any new wounds that weren’t already there. Except that now she’d developed a new fear—a fear of becoming a disappointment to Yurie. Despite Miyo having been convinced from the outset that the marriage offer would have come to nothing, the mere thought of hearing Yurie or Kiyoka call her unfit was unbearable.

The excitement and happiness she’d felt earlier when she’d been buying the threads for Kiyoka’s gift had sunk into the sea of sorrow in her heart. *I hate myself. I utterly despise myself for being like this.*

She didn’t say a word on the way back home. Sensing that Miyo didn’t want to talk, Yurie didn’t attempt to start a conversation. Eyes locked onto her feet, Miyo trudged along, oblivious to the bustle of the busy main street, the city alleys, the calm countryside path. In sharp contrast to her dark and heavy feelings, the surrounding area was bathed in sunshine, and the farmland and fields looked invitingly calm.

Yurie finally spoke to Miyo when they got home.

"Miss, why don't we have lunch now?"

"…Thank you, but I'm not hungry."

"But, miss…"

"Thank you so much for your company today. Please don't worry about me and go get some rest."

She avoided meeting the old woman's eyes, afraid of what she might see in them. Leaving Yurie in the hallway, Miyo retreated to her room. As soon as she slid her door shut, she crumpled onto the floor and sat there for a while, staring absentmindedly at the tatami mat.

I'm so useless. Why was she this way? Why was she good for nothing? Other people had plenty of wonderful qualities, her sister in particular, but she, she had nothing. Thoroughly convinced of her own helplessness, she had no idea how to go on.

Around the time Miyo and Yurie returned to Kiyoka's house, Kiyoka went to pay a visit to the Saimoris. He was still worried about Miyo going to the city without him, but she'd have Yurie with her. In any case, he needed to talk to Shinichi.

Many wealthy families had their estates in the part of the city where the Saimoris lived, but their large mansion stood out from all the rest. In contrast to the family home Kiyoka's father had built—a Western-style manor—this was a traditional Japanese residence. Old yet opulent. He figured it dated back to the era before this city became the capital. Yet, he knew that behind this elegant exterior lurked people rotten to the core.

A servant who was waiting for him by the gate led him to the main house. Kiyoka noted her excessive politeness.

“I have been expecting you, Mr. Kudou.”

Shinichi Saimori came out to greet him, his manner reserved yet still hospitable.

Quite the welcome he’s giving me.

Did this man not comprehend the situation? Did he seriously think Kiyoka was oblivious to how he’d treated his fiancée within these walls? If this man was seriously hoping to build good relations with him after what he’d done, his lack of moral character wasn’t helping. Then again, the Saimoris hadn’t enjoyed a good reputation in a very long time.

Perhaps their perception of the world was so skewed that they assumed everyone would treat Miyo like a worthless wench, Kiyoka included. Or else they’d thought Kiyoka had quickly disposed of her and had already forgotten her existence. Simply speculating about how these people’s minds worked made him sick to his stomach.

“I appreciate you agreeing to receive me on such short notice.”

It took great willpower to suppress his loathing for Shinichi and remain civil, but try as he might, he couldn’t manage to speak to him with any degree of amicability.

“It’s an honor to have you trouble yourself with a visit. Please do come inside.”

Kiyoka followed Shinichi down the hallway, glancing at his wife, Kanoko, as he passed her by. She stood modestly behind her husband, unreadable. But the virtuous-wife persona she was putting on revolted Kiyoka even more than the ugliness he knew lay just beneath her mask.

They showed him to the reception room. Kiyoka sat down to face Shinichi in front of a view of the well-maintained inner courtyard and the lush, pleasing pines contained within. Shinichi spoke first.

“Well, Mr. Kudou. What brings you here on this occasion?”

“Your daughter Miyo.”

Glaring at Shinichi, Kiyoka described his business without the usual pleasantries. The older man frowned and squared his shoulders in response.

“What did she do?”

What…? What was wrong with this man? Had he imagined Kiyoka had come to complain about Miyo rather than her father’s horrendous treatment of her?

“I wish to formally betroth her so that we may marry in the not-so-distant future.”

“Is that so?”

Shinichi replied after an unnaturally long pause before nodding, seemingly unfazed. The reaction of his wife, who was sitting in the corner, didn’t escape Kiyoka—he heard her sharp intake of breath, saw her eyes open wide.

“I would also like to take this opportunity to make matters between our families clear.”

“Hmph. What matters, specifically?”

“Men of my status are expected to compensate the bride’s family for giving away their daughter. However, I’m very reluctant to honor this custom in this case.”

Despite his animosity toward the Saimoris, Kiyoka explained things in a roundabout way to avoid rudely implying they didn’t deserve to benefit from Miyo in any way.

“What do you mean?”

“Can you not guess?”

His gaze hardened, and Shinichi briefly looked away.

“You’re saying my family will receive no compensation? But, Mr. Kudou—”

Kiyoka raised his hand to stop the man’s protests. He wished he could have simply cut the ties between their families as soon as possible without letting Miyo know he’d gone to see them. In fact, he could have easily made Shinichi sign an official declaration stating that his family would never contact Miyo or anyone from the Kudou household. And while that would have ensured Miyo’s peace of mind from then on, it would have also denied her closure. Memories of this house would haunt her forever. That was why he’d had to take extra steps.

“There is one condition.”

“…”

“If you offer your sincere apologies to Miyo in person, I will pay you a very generous bride price.”

Though Shinichi’s expression hadn’t changed, his fists were clenched. Meanwhile, Kanoko was grinding her teeth in indignation.

Kiyoka had thoroughly investigated their family affairs, so he knew that their status was hanging by a thread. Their beloved daughter Kaya had been born with Spirit-Sight, but her supernatural abilities weren’t worth mentioning. A chance remained that her own children might turn out to be extraordinarily Gifted, but if they weren’t, the Saimori family would no longer be able to fulfill their role as retainers to the emperor. Stripped of privilege and their stipend, they would have to rely on their amassed wealth to get by, but there was only so much to go around. The Tatsuishi family with whom they’d also had

relations was facing a similar predicament, so they wouldn't be much help, either. In light of this, Shinichi should have pounced at any handouts he could get.

"You want me to…apologize?"

"It's up to you. If you don't want to do it, we'll simply end relations between our families at once. Do keep in mind that I'm privy to the truth of how you've raised Miyo."

"Shinichi…," Kanoko addressed her husband imploringly.

You reap what you sow. A lack of blood relation doesn't excuse you from caring for your stepchild. Whatever grievances Kanoko and Shinichi had borne toward Miyo's mother, her daughter was just an innocent child who deserved a loving family to bring her up. Instead, they'd treated her as an outlet for their pent-up frustrations and snatched away from her the life she should have led. This was no mere trifle—the damage they'd done would be extremely difficult to repair.

Kiyoka waited, watching droplets of sweat appear on Shinichi's forehead. The older man closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he spoke in a voice that was more like a groan.

"Give me time to think it over," he replied.

"Very well. But see that you don't take too long."

"I won't."

No longer concealing his animosity, Kiyoka stood up to leave. Shinichi's shoulders were trembling with rage. He did not see his guest out.

Kaya had enjoyed shopping in the city, but when she'd returned home, she'd immediately noticed things were oddly tense.

"Are we having guests?"

She really wasn't in the mood for them. The shopping trip had left her somewhat unsettled. Though she didn't have any particular aversion to Miyo, chancing upon her half sister in the city had taken her aback. Still, nothing lifted Kaya's spirits like being nasty to Miyo. This time hadn't gone exactly to plan, however, and Kaya cringed just thinking about it. Her fiancé trying to take Miyo's side had been one thing, but finding out that Kudou hadn't thrown Miyo out yet had made her livid. She found consolation in telling herself that Kudou had allowed Miyo to stay in his house simply because he'd forgotten about her. If he cared, she wouldn't be walking around the city dressed like a pauper. It still nagged at her, though.

"Kaya, please, there's no need to be so upset."

"You're one to talk, Kouji. You like my sister that much? Spare yourself the effort of offering me any niceties."

Pouting, she turned away from Kouji. He dropped his shoulders in resignation, and they continued on in silence.

Why won't he say something?! Why won't he deny liking Miyo?! If he stroked her hair while whispering sweet nothings, then maybe she would forgive him. What an aggravatingly dense man. Perhaps it would be better to refuse his hand in marriage after all. Kaya carried on vilifying him in her head until he made a noise of surprise.

"What is it?" she asked. "Oh, could that be the visitor?"

The moment they entered the house, they saw a tall man exiting the reception room. He was dressed in a military uniform. Young but with many badges indicating a high rank. They bowed their heads

lightly as he passed so as not to be rude, but Kaya lifted her gaze just in time to catch the guest's complexion.

He's stunning…

He glared at her so coldly that she flinched, yet his beauty still enchanted her. Despite his slenderness and grace, he didn't give the impression of a weak man. She couldn't take her eyes off him as he walked away, the movements of his body so perfect, long hair swaying with every step. She was mesmerized.

After visiting the Saimoris, Kiyoka had stopped by his workplace before heading home. For some reason, Yurie was still there when he got back, even though she was usually gone by now. Both she and Miyo came out to greet him, but his fiancée didn't quite seem herself.

"Welcome back, Mr. Kudou."

"Welcome home, Young Master."

Miyo's thoughts seemed elsewhere. Yurie was looking at her as if she wanted to say something but had been told not to.

"Thank you," he replied. "Is something wrong?"

"Well, you see—"

"No," Miyo interjected quickly before Yurie had the chance to say anything else. "I'm sorry for worrying you. Everything is fine."

"Miss Miyo…"

Yurie protested, concerned. Kiyoka frowned. Miyo had gotten better at meeting his eye when they spoke, yet now she was refusing to look directly at him. It was as if she'd suddenly reverted to how she'd been on her first day in his home.

“Did something happen?” Kiyoka pressed.

“No, nothing at all. Now if you’ll excuse me…”

Rather than eating dinner with him as usual, she went back to her room without once raising her eyes from the floor.

That’s definitely not “nothing”…, Kiyoka thought.

Now that he and Yurie were alone, he turned to ask her about it. The old woman hung her head dejectedly.

“I’m so sorry, Young Master. I’m afraid I failed to protect Miss Miyo.”

“Did something happen while you were in the city?”

“Yes…”

Yurie told him that Miyo had completed her shopping without any incident, but the moment Yurie had briefly left her side, Miyo had been accosted by her overbearing half sister. Dismayed, Kiyoka nearly clicked his tongue as he listened to the explanation. To think this would have happened while he was at the Saimori residence. He wished he would have said something to Kaya when he’d run into her in the hallway. Kiyoka had really put the cart before the horse by speaking with Miyo’s father first.

“Except for coming out to greet you just now, she’s been holed up in her room ever since. I’ve been beside myself with worry. That’s why I didn’t go home.”

Kiyoka hadn’t yet told Yurie about Miyo’s abusive family. He didn’t intend to keep it secret from her; on the contrary, he was hoping Yurie would be able to use that information to help Miyo recover from her trauma, since the old woman had spent more time with Miyo than he had. But he simply hadn’t gotten around to it—a grave mistake, in hindsight. At that moment, he felt powerless. *I’ve been so shortsighted.*

Now Kiyoka didn't know what he could say to Miyo to comfort her. Though he'd turned down so many marriage offers, deemed so many women unsuitable for him, perhaps he was the one unfit for marriage. Maybe it was these moments, when he would freeze up because he didn't know what to say or how to proceed, that led people to call him cold and callous.

But this time, he couldn't let himself be paralyzed into inaction, because he genuinely wanted to protect Miyo. He wanted to see her smile from the heart again, as she'd done when he'd gifted her that comb.

"What can I do to build up her confidence?" he murmured.

"That's simple." Yurie smiled. "There's one method guaranteed to work—making her feel loved. Show her that you love and value her, and that will provide more than enough reassurance."

"…"

Love? Was that what he felt for her? While he wasn't sure about confessing his emotions, he could at least be honest with her about his intentions.

"If it makes her feel better…"

He would tell her everything.

It was very late, so he drove Yurie back to her house. When he returned, he went to see Miyo. She was in her room and had shut the door.

"It's me. May I come in?"

She opened the door just a fraction and peered through the gap.

"Forgive me, Mr. Kudou, but would you mind allowing me some time to be alone?"

To his surprise, she wasn't tearful or shaken. Her voice was normal, quiet but calm. But he could still tell that she was even more disheartened than usual.

"I just want to talk to you. Can you not spare a few minutes?"

"I'm sorry."

She'd tilted her head down so that he couldn't see her face. It didn't seem like the right time for him to convey his feelings now when she was so overwhelmed by hers. Sighing, he glanced at her small head, which she kept so persistently low. When someone was hurting, it was best not to force them to open up.

"Well, I won't insist, then."

"I promise I won't neglect the housework."

"…Don't worry about that."

Miyo had her head bowed as she tried to assuage his concerns.

"Let me just tell you this…"

Miyo was about to slide the door shut again but stopped when Kiyoka addressed her.

"What's eating you up inside—it'll get better before long. Don't let it torment you."

People were born either with the Gift or without it. Nothing could change that, but there were still plenty of other things Miyo could learn. Almost all the sources of her low self-worth could be resolved, her family issues included. All she needed to do was make that choice. Kiyoka had already made his.

"You can always talk to me about anything."

His urge to speak with her hadn't abated, but he forced himself to drop the subject for now. Perhaps it was better that he wait until she was good and ready.

"…I will."

Miyo's reply was a little too late. Her voice wasn't strong, nor was it weak, either.

Opting to change out of his clothes later, Kiyoka instead went to his study. He sat down with a sigh, lost in thought. Then he reached for his pen and stationery.

The season of cherry blossoms had ended, with flowers giving way to fresh foliage. It had been a week since Miyo had started keeping to her room. To Kiyoka, each of those days felt long and depressing. She wouldn't even see him off when he was leaving for work or come out to greet him when he returned. She took her meals in her room. His days grew colorless without seeing her, and his house—somehow colder.

What further brought him down was the continuous lack of an answer from the Saimoris, coupled with the relentless appearances of conjured familiars someone had sent to spy on him. Though he had an idea who might be behind the creatures, he'd made no progress in locating them or determining their motives thus far, so he couldn't make any progress on that front. Once again, he turned up at his workplace in a dour mood.

"Looking glum today, Commander," Godou remarked while organizing documents in Kiyoka's office.

Kiyoka noticed a smile playing on his subordinate's lips. It irked him that Godou found the situation amusing.

“Let me guess—it’s about the girl. She’s the first one you’ve kept around for this long. Correct me if I’m wrong, but you haven’t yet made things official with her, have you?”

“…”

“I never took you for a man who’d get in a funk over a woman. The world is full of surprises.”

“…Mind your own business.”

“This lady who stole your heart must be really special. I’d love to see her again.”

“Enough. This isn’t something to joke about.”

“Why not?”

Talking to Godou was exhausting. He was always fooling around.

“More importantly,” said Kiyoka, “can I count on you tomorrow?”

His capable right-hand man grinned.

“Of course. Central Station at noon, then a drive to your house. Don’t forget about my compensation, please.”

“Rest assured I won’t.”

“Then I’m your guy.”

Kiyoka had often been leaving his office during the day as of late. Of course, he made sure to put in an official request and obtain permission from his superiors beforehand each time, but he still felt slightly guilty about increasing Godou’s workload with his absences. To make up for that, he’d offered to pay his aide a little extra out of his own pocket. Godou instead asked Kiyoka to settle his tab for three nights at a popular *izakaya* in town—a paltry compensation as far as Kiyoka was concerned.

He thought of the next day, trying to imagine Miyo's reaction with a mixture of anxiety and anticipation, hoping she would be happy.

Miyo was sitting very still at her writing desk, slowly braiding threads. She'd gotten the technique down completely, but she wasn't ready for what would come after she finished it. And so she worked at a snail's pace to buy herself more time.

Fed up with Kaya reminding her of her own uselessness, Miyo avoided dwelling on her half sister. Instead, she thought of Kiyoka—his strength, his kindness, his beauty. Much as she felt as though she didn't belong next to such an extraordinary man, being with him was so wonderful that it made her wish she would never leave his side. She knew she should tell him that. That she should make every effort to become useful to him. Though she might not have had any special powers and might not be chosen as his bride, she could at least become his servant and support him from behind the scenes, like Yurie. Whatever happened, delaying the inevitable would change nothing.

She glanced at the side of her desk at the hair tie she'd already finished making. It was a gorgeous cord with stunning braiding. Excellent work for an amateur. She'd already completed the gift she wanted to make, so now she was using leftover threads to construct another braided cord using a different pattern—an excuse to stay holed up in her room.

As her head throbbed from lack of sleep, Miyo sighed. Ever since her arrival at Kiyoka's house, she'd been having nightmares. She would wake up in the middle of the night, overcome with self-loathing and anxiety, and be unable to fall back asleep.

“Pardon me for disturbing you, miss,” Yurie called from behind the door just as Miyo was starting to grow more despondent again. It was past noon, and since Miyo hadn’t been eating lunch recently, she didn’t know what Yurie might want from her.

“…Is something the matter, Yurie?”

“You have a guest, miss. Would you see her now?”

Someone’s come to see me? Who would bother visiting her at Kiyoka’s house? Miyo didn’t think it would be someone from her family, and she’d long lost contact with the friends she’d had from her school days. She couldn’t think of anyone else who would be aware of her location.

“Yes, please let her in.”

Whoever it was, it would have been rude to refuse to see her. Miyo heard the door to her room slide open, and she turned to look…and couldn’t believe her eyes.

“It’s been such a long time, Lady Miyo.”

Miyo was so surprised that her voice caught in her throat. Though the woman in her doorway had gotten on in years, her face was familiar all the same.

“H-Hana…”

“Look at you, all grown up.”

Hana was smiling at her with a glint of tears in her eyes. Yurie brought an extra floor cushion for Miyo’s guest and left them alone. They sat facing each other, but the atmosphere was strained, so they didn’t know where to look.

Hana hadn’t changed. She was a bit thinner, but Miyo recognized the calmness and tenderness in her eyes. However, Miyo was in too much shock to rejoice at their reunion. Hana had been her trusted

maid, and her disappearance was tied to that awful memory of being locked up in the storehouse. The moment when she'd suddenly lost the one person who'd always looked after her.

So many years had passed since then. When the Saimoris had dismissed Hana, Miyo had felt helpless, all alone in a hostile environment. It was as if one of her vital organs had been gouged out. She'd lost the will to live. As time passed, she became accustomed to the resulting emptiness. Since she'd never expected to see Hana again, Miyo hadn't imagined what she would say to her if they were reunited. Miyo remained silent until Hana spoke up.

"I'm glad to see you're well, Lady Miyo."

"Yes, likewise…," was all Miyo managed.

Hana was just as reverent to Miyo as she'd been back when she was still her maid. But since Hana's expulsion, the Saimoris had taught Miyo to speak like a servant herself. Now she was finding it difficult to converse normally.

"I'm a married woman now," said Hana.

"Oh, um… Congratulations."

"I have children, too. My husband is from a village close to my father's. We work on our farm together. I'm quite content with my life."

It was only then that Miyo noticed that Hana was more tanned than she'd remembered. Faint lines marked Hana's smiling face. She'd always been a warm person, but now she seemed both more motherly and more at peace.

"And you, Lady Miyo? Are you content with yours?"

That gave Miyo pause.

"I…"

She flashed back to everything that had happened since moving to this house, but she couldn't come up with an answer to her former maid's question. Seeing her hesitate, Hana placed her hands on top of Miyo's, rested them on her knees, and squeezed them tight. She used to do that when Miyo was little, so the warmth of her hands felt comfortingly familiar.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't be there for you when you were suffering so much."

"Hana…"

"Since I was unable to help you all those years, I thought I didn't deserve to see you," she confided, her face contorted by heartfelt regret. "But do you know why I decided to come after all?"

Their eyes met.

"Because I wanted to see you happy. I wanted to see my precious little lady who'd endured so many hardships smile joyfully at last."

"…"

Something prickled inside Miyo's nose. She didn't want Hana to see how low she'd fallen, to realize she was no longer her "precious little lady." She didn't want to burden the woman who'd looked after her when she'd lost her mother, who'd treated her with genuine warmth.

"But, Hana, I…"

Miyo had despaired when her family decided to offer her as a bride to the Kudous. But her fiancé, although frightening at first, had proved to be a kind man. She felt at home in his residence and had found a friend in Yurie. She'd experienced happiness she could have never imagined when she'd lived with her family. However…

“Hana, I don’t have the Gift. No Spirit-Sight, nothing.” Her voice trembled. “So I’m not worthy of marrying Mr. Kudou. I won’t be able to stay here much longer.”

Hana’s face blurred. Miyo bit her lip to stop herself from crying. Speaking her feelings aloud made them hurt even more. She didn’t want to leave, and it wasn’t just because she had nowhere else to go.

“My lady…”

Miyo had gone quiet, fearing she wouldn’t be able to hold back her tears if she said anything more. Hana watched her, concerned.

“…Let me ask you a question, Lady Miyo,” Hana whispered after a while. “How do you think I managed to come and see you today?”

“Huh?”

“Sometime after my dismissal, I went to your house again and pleaded to be rehired, but they flat-out refused me. Desperate to learn how you’d been doing, I asked the other servants I used to work with about you. But no matter how much I begged, they just stared at me sullenly and kept their mouths shut. I had no choice but to return to my hometown. At my parents’ suggestion, I married the man who is now my husband. So how would I, with no ties to your family or anyone else in the capital, come and find you here?”

“I…I don’t know…”

Miyo knew that Hana cared about her dearly, but her former maid couldn’t have found her on her own, no matter how much she’d tried. Someone must have told her that her family had sent her here.

“When I got the letter and saw who it was from, I thought it must have been a mistake at first. Why would a nobleman write to me, a commoner? My lady—this Mr. Kudou of yours truly has a heart of gold.”

That was the only possibility, of course. No one else would have gone through the trouble of finding Hana and bringing her here.

"It was him…"

It could have only been Kiyoka. Earlier, he'd told her, "What's eating you up inside—it'll get better before long. Don't let it torment you." He must have looked into her background and left no stone unturned. And if he knew about Hana, then he must know all about Miyo herself. So when he'd said that, had he meant…?

That I shouldn't worry about the marriage because it won't ever happen, since I don't have the Gift?

Despite her tendency to assume the worst, she'd come to know Kiyoka a little. While she couldn't know what he was like at work, he was always kind when he was with her. So that couldn't have been it.

"…Hana, have I been under the wrong impression this whole time?"

"My lady?"

"Unlike Kaya, I don't have Spirit-Sight or any other supernatural abilities… I'd always believed I was worthless because of that."

Possessing the Gift or not decided your fate. As someone born without it, Miyo was destined for poor treatment from her family. Wasn't that what she'd internalized at some point in her life? She couldn't deny it.

"I was scared of telling Mr. Kudou that I lacked the Gift. I thought it would bring this briefly happy period in my life to a close. I was absolutely convinced he'd get rid of me at once if he knew."

It hadn't occurred to her that this line of thinking would hold only if Kiyoka was like her father, to whom the Gift had been crucial. Miyo should have spoken to him honestly much earlier, not to hasten what she'd thought was inevitable—his throwing her out on the streets—

but to find out whether he was serious about marrying her. It had taken her this long to understand that.

"I…"

She glanced at her desk, at the cord she was braiding and the completed hair tie next to it, both of which she'd made for Kiyoka. Hana squeezed her hand, and Miyo turned back toward her, noticing the earnest look in her eyes.

"Have courage, Lady Miyo. Mr. Kudou is waiting for you."

"…!"

"You'll be fine. And however it goes, please know that I will come to your aid this time if you need it."

"Thank you, Hana."

Miyo hugged her like a little girl clinging to her mother. It brought back memories. She used to snuggle up to Hana and bury her face in her chest whenever she'd felt like crying. As Hana gently stroked Miyo's hair, her warm hand felt just as she remembered.

"I… I'll try my best."

She was worried about what Kiyoka would say, scared even. But she had to find the courage to speak with him, even if she had to take it one little step at a time. First and foremost, she needed to stop hiding in her room.

The world seemed brighter somehow when she disentangled from the embrace. Grabbing the hair tie, she left her room with haste.

He would normally be at work at that time, but she was so focused on what she had to do that it hadn't even crossed her mind. When she opened the door to the living room, she was certain she'd find him there.

"Mr. Kudou!"

It came out louder than she expected. Kiyoka looked up at her, startled. Combined with his hair draped artlessly over his shoulders and his casual attire, his expression was a little comical. Somehow, that was all the reassurance Miyo needed.

"What's this all of a sudden?" he asked.

Uncharacteristically, his eyes darted away from her as if he was unsure of himself. It was Miyo who'd been so afraid of this conversation, but now it seemed as though the opposite was true. She sat down next to Kiyoka, clutching the hair tie in her hand.

"Mr. Kudou, there's something I've neglected to tell you."

Her heart was pounding in her chest, and she broke into a cold sweat. As difficult as it was to meet his eye, there was no turning back now. She had to finish what she'd started. And just as Hana had told her he would, Kiyoka was waiting patiently for her to begin.

"I… I…"

"…"

"…I don't possess the Gift."

Once she started, the words flowed with urgency as she voiced what she'd been so afraid to confess. She willed herself not to cry.

"I don't have Spirit-Sight. Both my parents were from Gifted bloodlines, but I haven't inherited anything."

"…"

"As for my education, I only finished elementary school. My family forced me to work for them as a servant. Since I haven't received tutoring, I can't do anything you'd expect from a daughter of a wealthy family. And my looks… Well, there's nothing to speak of there, either. Those are the reasons why I don't deserve to be your wife."

The more she went on, the more despondent she became. Like a child being scolded, she shrank further and further into herself. Yet, she continued in earnest.

"I completely understand if you're angry with me, Mr. Kudou. For selfishly keeping the truth from you, for not wanting to be kicked out…"

Miyo had promised herself she wouldn't cry, but tears started to well up in her eyes regardless. She was on the verge of sobbing.

"If you tell me to die, I will take my life. If you tell me to leave your house, I will leave at once."

"…"

"I made this for you as a token of my gratitude and as an apology. If you have no need for it, please feel free to throw it away or burn it."

Placing the hair tie on the floor in front of him, she knelt and bowed down, as humbly as when she'd first met him.

"Thank you for everything you've done for me. I have no more secrets from you. Pray tell me what you wish to do with me."

Kiyoka didn't respond immediately. Too scared to look up at him, Miyo waited in silence with her eyes firmly shut.

"How much longer do you intend to prostrate yourself?"

She'd heard those same words before. As she looked up in surprise, she saw that Kiyoka wore a mischievous grin. She glimpsed it for only a moment before her vision was suddenly obscured.

"It would be quite a problem if you were to leave now, since I'm about to make our engagement official."

Miyo felt his large hand on the back of her head, breathed in the faint scent he liked to wear. She realized he'd embraced her tightly

and pressed her head against his chest. Both that, and what he'd just said about wanting to betroth her, made her head spin.

"M-Mr. Kudou…"

"Would you not like that? Do you not want to stay with me here?"

Of course I want to… Now her heart was racing for a different reason entirely. Her cheeks, which had turned pale from anxiety, flushed and grew so hot she thought steam might rise from them. Tongue-tied, she stayed in his embrace until she heard his sharp intake of breath, as if he'd come to his senses. When he released her, she noticed his ears were tinged red.

"I… Um…"

She felt so shy, it was difficult to speak, but she knew she had to communicate to him what her heart desired. To finish what she'd started, she would have to muster up a little more courage.

"I would like to stay with you, if you would permit it."

"Permit it?" He chuckled. "You're the only one I want to live with. No one else will do."

"…!"

Even after he'd learned everything, Kiyoka still wanted her. Joy filled her chest, and she was moved to tears again. If someone told her that all the hardship and anguish she'd endured was for this moment, she'd have thought it was worth it. The sacrifices she'd been forced to make seemed a small price to pay for being with this man.

"Miyo." He said her name for the first time in a voice so gentle that simply hearing it was pure bliss. "Would you tie my hair for me?"

"Yes… I'll be happy to."

Kiyoka picked up the hair tie and handed it to her. Miyo got up on her knees and moved behind him. His hair was gorgeous, soft and glossy like silk. She suppressed a sigh of envy. Her hands trembled, as if she was handling something extremely precious.

"I-I'm done."

Miyo had loosely tied his hair in the back and had brought it forward over his shoulder so that he could see the braided cord. It looked even better on his light tresses than she'd imagined. The color she'd chosen was purple—elegant but subdued, just like him.

"It's a pretty color."

Holding one end of the cord between his thumb and index finger, he smiled.

Goodness… It feels like my heart is going to burst out of my chest…

This time, however, it wasn't from fear.

"Thank you. I will treasure it."

"I-I'm glad you like it."

Realizing she'd made him happy was too much for her, making her stutter. She was in a state of bliss, thanking fate for bringing her to his house, for letting her meet him.

A little while later, when embarrassment had stopped coloring their visages and a newly placid atmosphere had descended on them, Hana came to announce she was heading home. Together with Yurie, they all went to the front door to see her off. Yurie had kept Hana company while Miyo had been talking to Kiyoka, and they'd had a wonderful time chatting about her over some tea. Miyo felt a pang

of guilt at having ignored her guest and leaving her to Yurie after she'd come such a long way.

"You're leaving already…?"

"Yes, but I'm not going straight back to my village—it's been so long since I've been in the city that I thought it would be nice to walk around a bit. Mr. Kudou has arranged a nice inn for me to stay at."

Kiyoka's thoughtfulness and generosity once against astounded Miyo. Though she felt indebted to him, she knew he'd tell her not to worry about it. He'd even had his aide, Godou, drive Hana here from the station… She made a secret resolution to find some way to make it up to Kiyoka, no matter how he might refuse her.

"I hope we can meet again, Lady Miyo. There's much I want to talk with you about."

"I'd love to see you again, too, Hana."

No longer servant and mistress, their newfound relationship opened up new possibilities. They could go out to shop or have a meal anytime.

"Hana, thank you so much for coming and giving me advice. If it weren't for you, I'd still be hiding in my room."

"I'm glad I could be of help. It was wonderful to speak to you again after so many years, now that you're no longer a child but a lovely young woman."

Smiling, they squeezed each other's hands. Neither could quite bring herself to say good-bye just yet. Suddenly, they heard the noise of an engine, and a car pulled up in front of the house.

"That'll be Godou," Kiyoka said before greeting the visitor. "Apologies for having you drive today."

"No problem, Commander. That's what we agreed on."

Godou stuck his head out the window on the driver's side. He'd come to pick up Hana and looked just as laid-back as the first time Miyo had met him. If it weren't for his uniform, no one would suspect he was part of the elite Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.

"Were you followed?"

"I don't think so. Looks like we evaded them today."

The women didn't hear Kiyoka and Godou's whispered exchange. Kiyoka had given this task to his aide instead of taking care of that himself because he didn't want whoever had been spying on him to find out about her. No one else needed to get involved.

"Hop in the car, ma'am!"

"Thank you, Mr. Godou."

Miyo couldn't take her eyes off Hana as she got into the vehicle. When she caught Godou staring at her, she bowed deeply with gratitude. He smiled charmingly at her, then waved before withdrawing his head back into the car.

"…Don't look so sad. You're free to meet whoever you want, whenever you want to."

Kiyoka put his hand on her shoulder as they watched the car drive away. *Did I look sad?* She touched her face with both hands, as if trying to gauge her own expression.

"Thank you, Mr. Kudou…"

"Don't worry about it."

Miyo was sure he understood everything she was thanking him for. But his reply was so typically curt that she couldn't help laughing.

Sucking air through his teeth in irritation, Minoru Tatsuishi crumpled the paper bird familiar who'd returned with nothing after failing to track down its target. At first, his familiars had all ended up burned to ashes, so he'd gotten more careful. Keeping his distance had proved partially successful—none of them had been destroyed, but they also never managed to gather the information Minoru wanted. Kiyoka seemed to be toying with them.

Although Minoru was more interested in Miyo, he still hadn't managed to get his familiars close to her even once.

"Can you believe Miyo hasn't been kicked out of Kudou's house yet? I can't fathom how she's managing that. Maybe she makes a good servant. That has to be what he's keeping her for, based on her clothes," Kaya had complained to him on a visit.

Minoru couldn't verify the veracity of Kaya's claims. Perhaps he could use this spoiled brat to his advantage, though. Since her engagement to Kouji, Kaya would often share gossip with her father-in-law-to-be, and some of the information she gleaned was actually valuable.

"Kouji really upset me that day. He always takes Miyo's side!"

Then she went on to tell him that she'd seen someone extraordinary that day, too. The man she'd described with dreamy eyes and flushed cheeks was unquestionably Kiyoka Kudou. So he'd indeed paid a visit to the Saimoris. Minoru was unable to ascertain what Kiyoka had talked to the head of the Saimori family about, but based on Kaya's impressions, he'd come to complain about the pitiful bride they'd sent him. Since his visit, the atmosphere in the Saimoris' home had become gloomier than ever before, so presumably he'd demanded payment as compensation for the incident.

They'd have saved themselves the trouble if they'd offered Miyo to my son.

Oblivious to his own faults, he cursed the Saimoris for their foolishness. *But better late than never.* Spurned by Kiyoka, soon Miyo would be available for the Tatsuishis. Then everything would fall into place. Minoru smirked faintly to himself, not suspecting for even a moment that Kiyoka had gone to speak with the Saimoris to officially ask for Miyo's hand in marriage.

A week had passed since Hana's visit. It was a pleasant early summer afternoon thanks to a light breeze keeping the heat at bay.

As Miyo finished putting on her kimono by tying the sash tightly, she felt as though she'd been reborn. The kimono, the sash, and all the accessories that went with the outfit were brand-new and of excellent quality.

I look a little like her, I think. Miyo's reflection in the mirror was not without resemblance to how she'd seen her mother in the dream, dressed in a cherry blossom–pink kimono much like the one she wore now. Her thin body no longer looked unhealthy, her complexion had improved, and even her hair started to show signs of glossiness.

Miyo would never forget that moment when Kiyoka gave her this kimono so similar to the lost memento of her mother. It already made her happy enough that he'd had several kimonos made for her, but on top of that, he'd also chosen this pink one for her because he'd thought it would suit her best. Keiko, the owner of Suzushima's, had told her this in secret. At first, she'd felt an illogical urge to scold him for going to such lengths to please her, but the elation she'd felt had rendered her speechless. Since then, she would beam brightly

every time she glanced at the kimono—a sight so unusual that it must have surprised everyone.

Miyo was getting ready to receive a guest that day. She'd invited Godou for dinner to thank him for driving Hana over when she visited. Though she was unsure whether she could be a good hostess, since Godou was almost a stranger, she'd asked Kiyoka about the foods his aide liked and had cooked them accordingly.

I hope Mr. Godou enjoys the dinner. Agonizing over it won't help any.

Miyo applied light makeup the way Yurie had taught her before hurrying off to the kitchen to finish preparing dinner.

"Aah, this is going to be a terrific evening," Godou announced cheerfully.

Kiyoka was driving home from work with his aide in the passenger seat. He shot the man a sharp glare.

"I thought I'd settled it with you by paying for your food and drink at the bar. We had an agreement."

"Your Miyo is going to be a good, sensible wife."

"Since when were you on a first-name basis with her?"

Godou's casual familiarity was getting on Kiyoka's nerves.

"What, are you jealous?"

"Of course not. But it's getting harder and harder not to punch you."

"That's jealousy, Commander!"

Godou theatrically wailed that his brutal superior was planning on killing him. Meanwhile, Kiyoka considered kicking him out of the car just so that he wouldn't have to bear his antics.

He'd been surprised when Miyo had announced that she wanted to invite Godou over for dinner, since he hadn't expected her to want to see anyone. After her long period of isolation at home, she'd become too ashamed of herself to seek contact with others. Now that her future was no longer uncertain and she no longer looked famished and abused, however, she must have recovered some confidence. It made Kiyoka happy.

"Have you lost the familiar that was tailing you?" Godou asked.

"Of course. I'm not an amateur."

Godou turned to look out the rearview window. A paper familiar would appear in Kiyoka's vicinity to spy on him every day without fail, but they currently seemed to be in the clear. Evading a human spy could be tricky, but trifling familiars like that were easily put off the scent. Kiyoka had surrounded his house with an invisible barrier impenetrable to paper familiars, and when Hana had been visiting, he'd taken every precaution to ensure the spy had been none the wiser.

"I didn't mean to doubt your abilities, Commander. I shouldn't have even asked," Godou admitted. "I've got to say, the Gifted have really pathetic abilities these days."

"With fewer Grotesqueries, there's no need for them to hone their skill."

Due to Western cultural influences and the advancement of technology in the empire, more and more people were denying the existence of the Grotesqueries, whose numbers had also strangely begun to dwindle. Consequently, the demand for talented Gift-users who could hunt down such creatures had been falling.

“What is it they say—that the Grotesqueries are illusions? Figments of the imagination? Well, that’s not entirely wrong,” said Godou.

“Indeed.”

Grotesqueries appeared when people would attribute phenomenon they didn’t understand to monsters. If enough people dreaded the same thing, their combined fear had the power to physically manifest those forms. With the advent of scientific thinking, however, people began seeking logical explanations for the world around them. Since fear of the supernatural had become less common, Grotesqueries had less to feed off.

“Always a good thing to have less work on your plate, though,” Godou commented.

With the situation being as it was, it was unavoidable that the Gifted families without any noteworthy talents would become less adept at using them. Even Kiyoka, celebrated as the best of his generation, wouldn’t have ranked among the top Gift-users of times past.

“Here we are. Get out.”

They’d arrived at Kiyoka’s cottage. Fed up with his aide, who spent the ride chatting away while his superior had been driving, Kiyoka shoved him out of the automobile. Godou yelped in surprise and quickly turned back to complain.

“Keep this brutality up, and I’ll tell Miyo about it!”

“Oh, will you? …It seems I’ll have to make sure you don’t talk.”

“No, wait, there’s no need for that…”

Godou turned pale. Kiyoka had only been joking, of course, but his aide liked showing off his acting skills. Kiyoka sighed.

Miyo was waiting on the porch as usual. Yurie wasn't there, so she must have already gone home.

"Welcome home, Mr. Kudou. Mr. Godou, thank you so much for visiting."

Miyo put her hands together and bowed slowly. She looked lovely in her beautiful kimono. Kiyoka had pretty much forced her to accept it in return for the handmade hair tie she'd given him. A pale shade of pink, it suited her as well as he'd imagined. Miyo's complexion looked healthier now, and she was wearing faint blush on her cheeks. Her well-combed hair, black and glossy like a raven's wing, was loosely tied at the back. Though the wrists poking out of her sleeves were still thin and fragile, she no longer appeared malnourished.

Kiyoka found her transformation fascinating. It was as if a pebble found by the roadside had concealed a gemstone within. Keiko had been right about her. To Kiyoka's annoyance, he felt almost grateful to the Saimoris for inadvertently giving him the perfect bride.

"Mr. Kudou? Is something wrong?"

"No, I…was just thinking that you look very beautiful in this kimono."

He immediately felt embarrassed for saying that out loud. *What's gotten into me?*

Upon noticing Miyo's cheeks turn scarlet in return, he felt the urge to run and hide. He also wanted to kick Godou, who looking at him as if to say he'd leave the two lovebirds alone, but naturally, he couldn't do that in front of Miyo. His heart was not his own these days. It was always giving him trouble.

"It's such a wonderful gift. I really love this color."

"I'm glad to hear that."

He'd been right in asking Keiko to tailor the kimono for Miyo as soon as possible. While it no longer matched the season, that was of no importance as long as she enjoyed it.

"Oh, forgive me for being so thoughtless, Mr. Godou! Please do come inside."

Realizing she'd been ignoring her guest, Miyo panicked for a moment. She opened the door and invited him in. Godou gave an uncharacteristically dry laugh and trundled inside with resignation, his eyes as blank as a dead fish's. Miyo led the men to the living room, which had been elegantly decorated for the occasion. They sat down, and she served the meal at once.

"Whoa, this is delicious!"

"Please eat to your heart's content."

Miyo kept bringing in more and more dishes. She had gone with smaller portions but greater variety. Next, she brought out small bowls and plates filled with the customary pickles and vegetables boiled in broth, which she'd seasoned strongly to complement what the men were drinking. Godou praised every single dish he tasted.

"You're still living with your parents. Don't they feed you well enough?" Kiyoka asked him.

"You misunderstand, Commander. Sure, we have a chef, but the simple flavors of home-cooked and bar food are uniquely comforting."

"…"

Maybe they were. Come to think of it, Kiyoka had at least two meals either Miyo or Yurie prepared for him every day, so perhaps he'd grown used to the kind of food commoners ate. When he'd lived at his parents' estate during his youth, he'd eaten nothing but

fine cuisine, to the point where he could barely stand it. Simple home-cooked meals were more to his taste.

"Allow me to refill your glass, Mr. Godou."

"Oh, thank you."

His praise of her cooking had Miyo slightly flustered as she poured him another drink. Once his glass was full, she bowed to him politely.

"Mr. Godou, I can't tell you how grateful I am for your help with Hana's visit."

"I just played the driver, that's all."

"But you're Mr. Kudou's aide, which means we could spend that afternoon talking only because you generously took care of his responsibilities at work."

Miyo was a dazzling hostess who spoke with unusual grace. Whether it was something she'd learned recently or an innate quality that had been long repressed, it didn't matter to Kiyoka. He took a large sip of his drink, proud of her and in a good mood. But then…

"Miss Miyo, no one has ever spoken to me so warmly before! You're an angel! Please break up with my cruel commander and marry me instead!"

"E-excuse me…?"

"Hey!" How dare Godou be so impudent? Kiyoka's voice became tinged with anger, his patience running thin. "Watch your tongue, Godou…"

Although she could be excessively humble at times, Miyo was attractive, did household chores readily and skillfully, and had good character. Evidently, Kiyoka wasn't the only man to see she'd make a good wife. A storm began brewing in his chest at the thought of her marrying someone else.

“I—I was only joking! Stop glaring at me like you’re gonna kill me! It’s really scary!”

Godou turned pale as he hastily explained he was merely teasing his boss, who was always mean to him. Though Kiyoka fixed him with a frosty glare at first, Godou got a hold of himself after hearing Miyo’s hesitant reply.

“Um, Mr. Godou, as much as I appreciate the offer…I’m afraid that I prefer Mr. Kudou… Please forgive me.”

Godou must have felt awkward seeing that Miyo had taken what was obviously a jest so seriously.

“Er… Of course you do! Sorry, that was a bad joke!”

And who could blame Kiyoka for reveling in his aide’s discomfort? He had it coming to him after making such a careless remark just for a laugh. Maybe now he’d learn the weight of his words. But what gave Kiyoka the most satisfaction was hearing Miyo say she preferred him. He’d harbored a nagging suspicion that she would have married anyone who’d offered her a warm home. While he wouldn’t have given her up even if that was the case, he felt much better knowing it wasn’t. Though she might have seen marriage only as a means of obtaining shelter at first, she seemed to have taken to him, since she was happily wearing the kimono he’d chosen for her. Lost in his musings, the conversation continued on without him.

“R-really? Even high-ranking officers…?”

“Absolutely. There are even generals who shiver at the very mention of his name. I dread to imagine what Commander Kudou has done to so utterly terrify them.”

“Hold on…”

As it turned out, Miyo and Godou had broken the ice and were talking animatedly—about him.

“You don’t want to incur the wrath of Kiyoka Kudou, oh no—he’s a demon when angry. Only a handful of people dare openly express their opinions to him, such as myself and his direct superior, Major General Ookaito.”

“Godou…”

“Our unit’s training is infamous for being among the top five most draconian in the entire army. And yes, you guessed it, it’s thanks to our merciless commander. At least his soldiers show no fear when battling Grotesqueries—they’re not half as terrible as him!”

“…Godou, that’s enough prattling.”

“Eek!”

Their chatter continued late into the night.

After Godou went back home, Kiyoka took a bath. On his way back to the living room, he noticed something was amiss. The house was strangely quiet, as if he was alone. Had Miyo finished cleaning up after dinner and gone to sleep?

The kitchen light was switched off, and no candles were lit, either. Miyo must have been in the living room or her bedroom. No, she couldn’t have been in her room—he’d passed by it earlier and didn’t sense her presence. He frowned and headed to the living room. As he neared it, he caught a few fragmented words.

“…No—no, please… Mother…”

It was Miyo’s voice. She sounded delirious. Alarmed, Kiyoka yanked the door open and saw Miyo asleep, her head resting on the table in the corner of the room. She had probably nodded off from exhaustion after a long day. That normally wasn’t anything unusual,

but… He managed to pick up a faint echo of a supernatural ability that had been used.

I'm not imagining this…

Since Kiyoka had a keen sense for people's presences, no one else could have entered the house while he was in the bath without his noticing. Nor had he or Godou activated their special powers during dinner. This was alarming. Could some otherworldly creature that even Kiyoka couldn't detect have sneaked into his house and used an ability? Was that possible? Another explanation sprang to mind, but he ignored it for now as he approached Miyo's slumbering form.

"…Please, don't…"

Her voice was desperate and imploring. Kiyoka stepped quietly over to her side. Miyo's cheeks were wet from tears, and while her eyes were shut, her face was contorted in anguish. Had she been sleeping peacefully, he wouldn't have woken her up, but she was evidently suffering. He put his hand on her shoulder and shook her gently.

"Miyo… Wake up, Miyo."

"…Kaya…stop… No more…"

Despite his address, she was still in the clutches of her nightmare.

"Wake up!"

Concerned, he raised his voice, and she finally stopped mumbling in her sleep before drowsily opening her eyes.

"…Nngh?"

"Snap out of it, Miyo. Are you okay?"

"Huh? Mr.…Kudou?"

Upon seeing that she seemed fine, he let out a long sigh of relief. But he couldn't let his guard down, since he knew an unknown power had activated there recently.

"Yes, it's me. You had fallen asleep, and it was hard to wake you. Are you feeling all right?"

"Um…"

Slowly sitting up, she tilted her head to the side in confusion as though she hadn't fully woken up yet and didn't understand what was going on. Kiyoka's frown deepened in worry as he examined her complexion, which was still damp from tears.

"Were you having a bad dream?"

"It was…a dream?"

She was processing everything sluggishly, but as she thought back to the nightmare, her eyes opened wide in fear, and fresh tears streamed from them. He hadn't seen her cry like this before. It hurt him to see her so distraught, hunched and sobbing uncontrollably with both hands over her face. Instinctively, he reached his arms around her and brought her close in an embrace.

"Mr. Kudou, I—I…"

"It's all right. That must have been an awful dream. Just cry it out."

Based on what he could piece together from the snippets of words she'd uttered in her sleep, *Mother* and *Kaya*, she'd been dreaming about her family doing something awful to her.

"You're my fiancée. And as I told you before, that means we need to be open with each other. You can rely on me more, come to me for help. You don't have to hide your feelings; you can ask me for comfort. Isn't that what marriage is about—supporting each other?"

He wondered how much of what he was saying was reaching her. They'd become closer recently, but the wounds in her heart were more serious than he'd imagined. Even his care wouldn't be able to heal them quickly.

I wish she was free from this burden already…

No one was going to hurt her anymore. If someone from Kiyoka's family or social circle wished to do her wrong, he wouldn't let them anywhere near her.

"Cry your heart out. When your tears dry up, I'd like to see you smile again."

"…"

He kept stroking her hair as she buried deep into his chest, shaking from sobs. Kiyoka was prepared to comfort her like this as many times as it took for her to stop crying, to stop hurting. The woman in his embrace felt delicate, small, and fragile, as if she would easily break if he wasn't there to protect her.

A little while later, she described her dream to him, speaking in spurts between her sobs. In the nightmare, her stepmother and half sister had ripped the mementos of Miyo's mother to shreds and burned them. When she'd begged them to stop and give her possessions back to her, they'd laughed. Though she didn't say whether it was based on actual events, Kiyoka had a feeling it wasn't far from the truth.

"That must have been so hard."

Kiyoka didn't mean just the dream. He'd said this while imagining Miyo—at not even ten years old—having to find a way to survive all on her own after losing Hana, her one and only friend. He could only imagine what Miyo's life had been like based on what he'd read in

the report. But he also wanted to believe her heart would heal with time.

"Can I really stay with you forever, Mr. Kudou?"

"Of course. We can be together for the rest of our lives." She looked up at him, and he smiled tenderly down at her. "You're making me repeat myself. I've already told you I want you in my life."

"…Even though I'm so useless? So talentless?"

"I don't think of you that way. But even if you were, my feelings wouldn't change."

Miyo blushed, blinking away the last of her tears as she averted her gaze bashfully.

"I…"

"?"

"I don't think I deserve you…but I want to stay with you forever and help you somehow."

"You can."

"I need to…do better, so that I can support you for as long as possible."

"I would appreciate anything you do."

It struck him that this was the first time she'd spoken about the future with any degree of optimism, after enduring years of her family depriving her the right to her own free will. Though it was obvious she wouldn't be able to regain her confidence so soon, Kiyoka was prepared to encourage her to take small steps toward believing in herself and trusting in him.

But what was that power she manifested earlier…? Its faint traces had almost faded away. Kiyoka knitted his brows again, pondering

potential explanations. It was possible a supernatural ability had brought on Miyo's nightmares. If that was true, then the culprit was undoubtedly a member of the Usuba family.

Miyo was more skittish around Kiyoka the following morning. She felt guilt and shame for falling asleep while waiting for Kiyoka to return from his bath and that a simple nightmare had reduced her to a sobbing mess before him. True, he wanted her to be open about her feelings, but as far as Miyo was concerned, this behavior was unacceptable for a grown woman. Worse still, she'd let it slip that she'd been having nightmares since moving into his house, and that made him worry. She saw his expression cloud over and become intimidating. The terrifying coldness in his eyes befitted his reputation as a cruel and callous man. He didn't seem upset with her, but the chilly air around him made her shiver nonetheless.

Once breakfast had passed in awkward silence and Kiyoka was getting ready to leave for work, Miyo handed him a small parcel.

"So, um, I made this for you…"

As an apology—but she left that part unsaid.

"…You packed me a lunch?"

"Yes…"

She wasn't entirely convinced this would clearly convey that she was sorry and wanted to make up for causing a scene last night, but that was what Yurie had suggested. The lunch box had just been lying around the kitchen, so she'd filled it with food she put her heart into cooking and had carefully wrapped it in cloth.

“Thank you.” He accepted it from her with a smile, got into his car, and drove away. It might have been her imagination, but he seemed to have cheered up.

“I have to do more for him.”

She wanted to put a smile on his face, to support him as his fiancée. There might not be much she could do, but if she put every effort into each little thing, maybe eventually she would earn her place beside him as his wife.

CHAPTER 4

Choosing Defiance

Minoru Tatsuishi finally caught sight of her by pure chance. Spying on Kiyoka Kudou had become part of his daily routine. That day, he shut himself in his study and observed Kiyoka and the city through the eyes of his paper familiar in hopes of gathering information that would let him seize Miyo for his family.

At first, he thought he'd made a mistake—that couldn't have been her. She was nothing like he remembered, nor anything like the impression Kaya had given him of Miyo. It was undoubtedly Miyo, yet her manner, expression, and attire were all different from what he was used to. It wasn't supposed to be like this. When it finally dawned on him that Kiyoka indeed intended to keep her, Minoru wanted to shout in anger. Just thinking about it made him seethe with rage, ready to tear his hair out in frustration. He was incensed beyond the point of rational thought; he knew that Kiyoka was out of his league, but his ire shoved that simple fact into the back of his mind.

He summoned Kaya at once. She'd be his obedient tool. He didn't care what anyone might think of his ways; Miyo was his treasure, not Kiyoka's. Minoru needed the Gift in the Usubas' bloodline to restore his own family's status.

"What's the matter? Why did you want to see me?"

Eyeing him questioningly, Kaya promptly sat down in the leather chair opposite him. He smiled at her.

"…I've just seen the most unbelievable thing."

"Huh?"

“I thought it might be of interest to you as well, Kaya. Wouldn’t you like to know what your sister has been up to lately?”

Her mother’s command had become ingrained in her psyche.

“Kaya, you must never become like that.”

Her mother had drilled that into her. Every time they came across her sister in the vast Saimori residence, her mother would point at Miyo and urge Kaya to avoid ending up like her. Miyo wasn’t a Saimori—she was useless.

Kaya’s mother demanded her daughter be superior to her stepdaughter in every way. Kaya had to be a perfect student, because if she made even the most trivial of mistakes, her mother would scold her. Kanoko would reel off all the malicious gossip about Kaya’s blunder, insisting that Kaya was going to end up like Miyo because of it. Thus, the notion that she always had to be better than her half sister took root in her mind. Anything Miyo had, Kaya would need, too. In fact, Kaya had to have even more than her sister. When her soon-to-be father-in-law called her to his study and told her what he’d learned of Miyo, she didn’t believe him.

Lies, lies, lies…! Her half sister, walking around the city in a stylish kimono, with a servant in attendance? That had to be made up.

She went back to her house, shut herself in her room, and activated her Spirit-Sight as her father had taught her. Then she clumsily constructed a paper familiar. Anyone with Spirit-Sight was capable of learning this supernatural technique. As a woman, however, she hadn’t been expected to battle Grotesqueries herself, so she’d never much cared about mastering paranormal crafts. Despite that, she was still capable of constructing a paper familiar and using Share-Sight to see through its eyes. Opening the sliding

door, Kaya released the familiar she'd fashioned out of tiny scraps of paper.

It has to be some kind of mistake. She clenched the one remaining scrap in her hand.

When she'd been in the city a few weeks ago, she'd been relieved to find her sister dressed in a shabby old kimono. But what if Kiyoka was actually going to follow through on her marriage offer?

The stunning man she'd seen at her house that day was none other than Kiyoka Kudou. Was her good-for-nothing sister going to end up with a handsome husband and enough riches to keep an army of servants while dressing in the finest of kimonos? *No. No, that can't happen.*

Kaya had an inkling that taking over as the mistress of the Saimori household wasn't such a desirable prospect. She'd gathered as much from her classmates and social circle. Few names came up when the topic of noteworthy families with the Gift surfaced, but Kudou was always among them. On the other hand, neither the Saimoris nor the Tatsuishis were worthy of mention. People thought they lacked both capability and promise. Though their wealth and status from their past achievements still forced their peers to accept them as nobility, they certainly didn't command much respect. Since both families were already on the path toward ruin, Kaya couldn't count on a carefree life of opulence as the wife of a Tatsuishi and the successor to the Saimoris. The mere thought that her sister could marry into the rich Kudou family was absurd.

In truth, Kaya cared neither about Kouji nor about inheriting the Saimori name and legacy. But she did care that Kiyoka Kudou considered Miyo a suitable wife when it obviously should have been her.

It's so ridiculous. Miyo can't possibly steal what should be mine… Oh!

Her familiar was winding its way through the crowds on a busy city street. Kaya spotted someone who looked like her sister and nearly had a stroke.

"No way, that can't be Miyo…"

She was the very picture of a noblewoman, dressed in an exquisite sky-blue kimono with a charming white parasol in hand as she chatted with the servant Kaya had seen Miyo with before.

Miyo looked like a different person. Though she was petite and fragile, she no longer seemed unhealthily thin. Her hair, which used to be dull and frizzy, now shone beautifully in the sunshine. This wasn't the haggard, unattractive sister she'd known.

"How on earth did she get this way…?"

Shocked and confused, Kaya ordered her familiar to follow the pretty young lady and her servant. When she saw they were getting close to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit's base, however, she had the presence of mind to make it wait at a safe distance. The lady who looked like her sister exchanged a few words with the guard and then waited by the gate. And who came out to greet her but the same striking man who'd visited Kaya's father a few weeks earlier. To her mounting surprise, his expression was nothing like she remembered. The first time she'd seen him, he'd seemed cold and heartless, with murder in his eyes. But the man she now watched through her familiar was beaming affectionately at the lady. In turn, she smiled back at him with lightly flushed cheeks. There was no mistaking it—they were a loving couple enjoying a pleasant conversation.

"Why…?! How?!"

Kaya was so thrown that she lost control of her shabby familiar, the images it had been sending her vanishing from her mind.

This didn't make sense. It was impossible. Her sister, looking that gorgeous? It was fanciful wrapping on an empty box. She might have been dressed up prettily, but she was still nothing. Kaya tried to convince herself that it didn't change anything. Miyo had lived a servant's life. She had no accomplishments and was without the Gift. It was preposterous to even suggest that a man as perfect as Kiyoka Kudou would choose to marry her.

Kaya was more attractive. She excelled in everything. She deserved better than just remaining a Saimori.

"Kaya, you must never become like that." And she wouldn't. She wouldn't let Miyo outdo her.

I should marry into the Kudou family!

She ran out of her room and rushed straight to her father's study. Her parents had always doted on her. They'd change her fiancé if she asked, she thought. But she was to be severely disappointed.

"No. Don't waste time on this foolishness. You should be learning how to be a good wife to Kouji Tatsuishi."

"Why?!"

Her father frowned, exasperated. Kaya didn't understand why he wouldn't listen to her and grew even more irritated.

"This is pointless. Forget about Miyo already."

"It's not about Miyo—it's about me! I'm more suitable to marry into the Kudou family!"

"Kaya, don't you have anything better to do? Why don't you go and spend some time with Kouji?"

"But, Father!"

No matter how she pleaded with him, he wouldn't listen to her. This had never happened before. Even when he started off staring at her sternly, he'd eventually relent and give her what she wanted. Why hadn't he this time?

"Kaya?"

She ran into Kouji in the corridor outside her father's study. He must have just come over for a visit.

"Kouji…"

Kaya hesitated. Kouji was Miyo's friend. If she told him she wanted to do something to thwart her sister's newfound happiness, he would definitely be against it. But on second thought… She knew he loved Miyo. Swapping brides would be in his interest as well.

"Kouji, I've been thinking…," Kaya began before asking him if he'd prefer marrying Miyo.

"What?"

His brow furrowed in confusion.

"Wouldn't you be happier marrying her instead of me?"

"I don't understand why you're asking me this."

"I would clearly make a better bride to Kiyoka Kudou, so I've been thinking of swapping places with my sister. It would be for the best. You'll help me, right?"

"Don't be silly," he snapped. Kaya caught a glimpse of resignation in his eyes, and this irritated her.

"Why don't we just do it? You like Miyo better than me."

"It doesn't matter who I like. Did your father even give you permission?"

"…"

“You can’t do anything without his blessing.”

“…Oh, I see. So you’re going to be cruel to me, too.”

Finding sympathy from neither her father nor fiancé, Kaya felt bitter disappointment. *But wait—Kouji’s father will surely side with me!*

Not only did he always listen to her, but he’d also told her about Miyo in the first place. He would help. That reassured Kaya—she would always have people she could count on. She was convinced of her superiority to Miyo and certain any man would choose her over her half sister.

Sometime earlier…

“Miss Miyo, are you ready?”

“Yes, I’m coming!”

Miyo stepped out of the house into the sunshine. It was only morning, but the sun was already beating down. Kiyoka hadn’t come home the night before—he’d had so much work that he’d stayed in his office. Assuming he must be exhausted, Miyo was keen to do something nice for him, so she decided to bring him a home-cooked meal. She’d heard from both Yurie and Godou that Kiyoka would skip meals when he was swamped with work. If they set off now, they’d make it to his office in time for lunch.

“Young Master will be delighted.”

“I hope so…”

Clutching the cloth-wrapped lunch box, Miyo took one last look at her outfit to make sure she was presentable.

She'd only just received the pink kimono a few days earlier when more packages had started arriving from Suzushima's, containing thin, unlined kimonos perfect for this time of year; matching undershirts; sashes; and accessories. Miyo was awestruck at the sight of so many parcels stacked up high in their small house. She was too scared to even think of how much it all must have cost Kiyoka, but it would have been a waste to just store the clothes away, so she started to wear them sparingly. Since she was going out that day, she'd donned a sky-blue kimono with a gorgeous wisteria pattern that she'd paired with a yellow sash.

"Take this with you as well, Miss Miyo."

"Gosh, it's so cute…"

"The sun's so strong this time of year. Young Master told me to give it to you."

Yurie handed her an adorable white lace parasol. Well crafted and probably very expensive, it could complement both Western- and Japanese-style outfits. Miyo would feel like a refined lady of high birth by walking around with it…but she had some reservations about accepting it.

"…I hope Mr. Kudou hasn't been spending too much money on me…"

A high-ranking officer from a family as affluent as his probably didn't need to even look at prices, but he seemed to have been spending so lavishly on gifts for her that she couldn't help being concerned. In addition to buying her new kimonos, which was plenty already, he kept finding excuses to provide her with all sorts of everyday goods, on top of the food and lodging she was already receiving. While this was something most girls from wealthy families felt entitled to, Miyo had never experienced anything close to that level of generosity, so it seemed like too much for her. In fact, she

felt downright guilty that Kiyoka was squandering his personal wealth on her.

"Well, I don't know the specifics of Young Master's personal finances, of course, but I can tell you he's been living such a modest, frugal life that his recent spending is certainly of no consequence. Shall we get going?"

"Y-yes, let's go."

Yurie gave her a gentle push, and they started walking. When they entered the city boundaries, Miyo, despite herself, thought back to her unpleasant encounter with Kaya. She desperately hoped not to run into her half sister again. Her life had become peaceful, but the memories of her past weren't so easily swept under the rug. If her sister confronted her again, she would freeze up in terror just like last time.

At least now she had people she could rely on, people she could turn to for help. Knowing that lessened her ever-present anxiety.

"Hello."

Miyo greeted the guard outside Kiyoka's base, who asked her to identify herself and state her business. She haltingly explained that she was Kiyoka's fiancée and that she'd come along with their maid, Yurie, to deliver him some food.

"Commander Kudou's fiancée…? Please wait here while I check it with him."

The guard seemed thrown by that, as if he didn't quite believe her. She and Yurie patiently waited as ordered, and soon enough, Kiyoka emerged from one of the buildings, slightly flustered. He was usually so cool and composed that it was strange to see him like that.

"Miyo, Yurie, what are you two doing all the way out here?"

“You’ve just been working so hard, Mr. Kudou,” said Miyo. “I didn’t want to disturb you while you’re at work, but I thought I should bring you something to eat in case you haven’t had the time to go out for a meal.”

She smiled self-consciously and handed him the wrapped parcel.

“O-oh, I see. That’s…that’s very thoughtful.”

He mumbled his thanks and accepted the bundle with a frown. Someone who didn’t know him very well might have mistakenly thought Kiyoka was upset, but Miyo understood that he was simply shy. Kiyoka’s demeanor and expressions often invited misunderstanding.

“You’ve walked a long way. Do you want to come in and rest awhile?”

“I’m all right. How are you feeling, Yurie?”

“Oh, no, I’m just fine.”

Yurie smiled and patted her chest as if to show she still had plenty of energy left. She had a strong constitution from working as a servant her whole life.

“We wouldn’t want to tear you away from your work, so we’ll head back now.”

For a moment, she thought he seemed disappointed, but that couldn’t have been the case. He was very busy and wouldn’t have had the time for her. They were about to leave when Kiyoka turned serious and asked:

“Miyo, do you have that amulet I gave you?”

“Huh? Ah yes… I have it in here.”

He nodded when she pointed to the small drawstring bag hanging from her wrist. Then someone called his name from one of the office

buildings, and he shouted back a reply. Within an instant, his expression had hardened into that of a commander with important responsibilities.

"I'll be there in a minute!" Kiyoka yelled before speaking to Miyo again. "I'm glad you brought it with you. I wish I could walk you part of the way, but duty calls."

"Please don't worry. We've taken enough of your time. Good luck with work."

"Thank you. Take care on the way back."

"We will."

He smiled at her and patted her head before going back inside.

"Heh-heh, Young Master was acting so bashful, wasn't he?"

"I suppose so…"

As they headed back, it occurred to Miyo to check her bag. She looked inside with consternation.

"Is something the matter?" Yurie asked.

"Um, well…"

She moved some things around in it, but what she was looking for wasn't there. Could it have fallen out? No, on second thought…

"I told Mr. Kudou I had the amulet, but it seems I left it at home."

"Goodness!"

Miyo had chosen a different bag to match her kimono and had forgotten to move the amulet from the old one. It hadn't crossed her mind that she could be so careless, which had resulted in her inadvertently lying to Kiyoka. It happened only because she was so unused to going out, but that, of course, was no excuse.

I really am hopeless…

Not only did she become more anxious, knowing that she didn't have the amulet with her made her somehow feel less under Kiyoka's protection. She was also riddled with guilt for having broken her promise to him.

"In that case, we should hurry back home," Yurie suggested.

"Yes, of course."

Miyo nodded and hastened her pace. She didn't know if the amulet had any power, but since Kiyoka had insisted she carry it on her every time she went out, it must have been important. The amulet preyed on her mind so much that she couldn't enjoy her stroll.

Yurie and Miyo continued on without talking much until they'd almost made it out of the city. Now all that remained was taking a quiet countryside road back home. The moment they relaxed, however, they heard the loud noise of an engine before a car stopped abruptly right next to them. Miyo's first thought was that it was Kiyoka, but she was mistaken.

"Miss Miyo!" Yurie shrieked.

The unexpected turn of events so confounded Miyo that she froze for a moment.

"Huh? Yurie— Aah!"

Before she even had the time to turn around, someone had grabbed her arm so hard that it hurt and pulled her away. Her assailant's grip was too powerful to resist.

"What are you—?"

Who would do this? Before Miyo could even manage a glimpse of the assailant, they swiftly gagged her and threw a sack over her head. She couldn't see, couldn't speak, couldn't fight back.

Mr. Kudou…! I'm so scared…!

They heaved her up and violently tossed her into the car. Panicking and struggling to breathe, she fell unconscious.

Kiyoka's fountain pen moved swiftly as he attacked his pile of paperwork. He was just about to reach for his stamp when his subordinate called from behind the door to his office.

"Commander…"

He picked up a hint of unease in the soldier's voice. Kiyoka hadn't scheduled any meetings that day. Perhaps it was an emergency? Frowning, he rushed out of his office and into the waiting room by the base entrance. He saw a familiar face as soon as he entered.

"…Yurie?"

She'd left with Miyo only a short while ago. The old woman nearly fell over as she leaped to her feet and ran to him.

"Young Master, it's Miss Miyo…!"

"What happened?"

"Sh-she's been… She's been…"

"Yurie, pull yourself together."

"We must hurry! We have to go at once!"

The normally placid Yurie was so agitated that she was incoherent.

"Calm down, Yurie. Take your time and explain what happened."

"Miss Miyo, she…"

"She what?"

"She's been abducted…!"

Kiyoka moaned. *No—it can't be…!* He'd taken kidnapping into consideration but thought the chances were very low. How could he have been such a fool?

After getting the frenzied Yurie to sit down, he started questioning her.

"Did you run into anyone before she was taken? Someone from the Saimori family or a Tatsuishi perhaps?"

"N-no, we didn't see anyone. We were heading straight home."

"But Miyo had the amulet on her."

"…Well, you see…"

Yurie explained that after they'd left him, Miyo had noticed she'd forgotten the amulet. Both Yurie's hands and voice were shaking. She blamed herself for not having checked if Miyo had had everything with her before they'd left the house.

Kiyoka exhaled slowly in an attempt to calm himself before the raging emotions in his chest made him explode. The amulet he'd given Miyo concealed her from familiars. While it couldn't hide her from ill-intentioned humans or protect her from physical assault, it was effective against Gift-users trying to locate her that way.

"…Tsk!"

Kiyoka's powerlessness incensed him. Hastily taking out a few scraps of paper from his pocket, he channeled his power into them to create familiars and sent them out to look for Miyo in the city. Since the capital was so vast, however, this method was both time-consuming and unreliable.

He was almost certain he knew the identity of the perpetrator, but without proof, he couldn't act. Things would be okay if his familiars managed to locate her, but he knew the chances of that were slim. And though Kiyoka was powerful enough to barge into the suspect's

house and overwhelm them, this could backfire if he couldn't back up his accusations. He needed decisive evidence. It was maddening. As much as he wanted to rescue Miyo this instant, his hands were tied.

"Commander, you've got another visitor."

The laid-back voice of one of Kiyoka's subordinates broke the heavy silence.

"Who is it?"

Kiyoka kept his emotions at bay when he replied. But Godou didn't answer—instead, he let the guest into the room. It was the last person Kiyoka had expected. The man spoke with great reluctance, clenching his fists as if struggling to control himself.

"It's absurd that I should be asking you for help… But I can't save Miyo alone."

Kaya's fiancé, Kouji Tatsuishi, stood there on the verge of tears.

Kouji had sworn to protect Miyo. That was why he'd agreed to wed Kaya and inherit the Saimori name. And yet, there he was, sitting in Kiyoka's car as they drove at top speed, biting his lips till they were bloody. The regrettable circumstances of this incident, which he'd laid out to Kiyoka at the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit's base, kept replaying in his memory.

Kaya was acting strange. She announced out of the blue that she wanted to swap husbands with Miyo. When he told her that was impossible, she went to speak with his father instead. That made him

suspicious, so he followed her. What he overheard next made him doubt his sanity.

“What if Miyo agreed to it?” said Kaya.

“Yes,” replied Minoru, “in that case Kudou would have to honor her wishes and call off the engagement. You can break Miyo with ease and make her say what you want.”

“And I’m sure my mother will help out, too! Can you bring Miyo to us?”

“Easily.”

Satisfied with the plan, Kaya clapped her hands in delight.

“I don’t believe it! What on earth has gotten into you?!”

Kouji stormed into the room, and the pair bored into him with frigid glares.

“What are you complaining about?” said Kaya. “I told you earlier—I’m going to end Miyo’s engagement and take her place. You said it wouldn’t work without my father’s permission, so I’m here asking yours for advice.”

“You can’t be serious.”

Overcome by shock, he looked questioningly at his father.

“This is what must be done to get Miyo back.”

“But, Father, you spent all these years telling me not to interfere in other families’ business!”

In the past, Kouji’s father had stopped him every time he’d tried to help Miyo and had urged him not to meddle. But what he was doing now contradicted his own advice. Minoru Tatsuishi sighed at this accusation.

“That was because it wasn’t in our interest for the Saimoris to realize Miyo’s value. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have given her away so easily.”

“What…?”

Kouji didn’t understand.

“They’d have clung to her if they knew her true worth. If her family alienated her, we’d have better odds of marrying her into ours.”

“…”

His father had turned a blind eye to the abuse Miyo had suffered at the hands of her family just so that he could acquire her as a bride for his son down the road? Now that he’d realized how cruel and calculating his father’s intentions for Miyo had been, Kouji’s fury reached a boiling point. Blood rushed to his head, and he saw red.

Kouji despised his father. There was no way Minoru hadn’t realized the extent of Miyo’s suffering, how much misery she’d endured, how she’d been rendered unable to smile. Standing back and allowing that to happen was inhumane. The fact that Kouji had followed the orders of someone so wicked for so long infuriated him. Rage surged within him, and the windows in the room cracked with a shrill noise. With his emotions out of control, his powers now bent to the whims of the untamed fury that had overtaken him.

“…I won’t let you get away with this.”

“There’s nothing you can do, Kouji.”

“You can’t tell me what to do anymore!”

The furniture in the room—chairs, tables, bookcases—all started shaking.

“Kaya, you go home.”

“But, sir…”

“I’ll come see you as soon as I’m finished taking care of this.”

“Understood. Rest assured I’ll be able to change my sister’s mind.”

Kaya glanced at Kouji but left the room obediently, as if she’d lost interest. The very moment she shut the door, everything in the room shot up into the air, defying gravity.

“I won’t let you use Miyo as you see fit…!”

As he yelled, the floating objects in the room flew at Minoru with terrifying momentum. Telekinesis, the ability to move objects through sheer force of will, was one of the basic Gifts. Kouji had thought making a chair levitate was the best he could manage, but he was finding that he possessed far more power than he’d ever imagined. Maybe enough to rend a human body asunder and send the pieces flying. Yet, his father refused to budge, undaunted.

“What a surprise to see you can muster this much power. The extent of one’s might can vary depending on their state of mind, as you’re illustrating right now.”

Minoru lifted his hand, and all the items Kouji had launched at him stopped moving before slowly drifting down to the floor.

“Why…? Move! Move as I will you to!”

“Don’t be foolish. You’ve never trained to cultivate your powers. You’re no match for me.”

Like a cyclone passing over him, Kouji’s ability had already faded away and become undetectable. Though his anger hadn’t subsided, he couldn’t replicate the energy he’d tapped into just a moment earlier.

“Dammit… Why won’t it work?!”

Why was he so powerless? Kouji had confidently promised to protect Miyo, yet he lacked the strength to act when push came to

shove. He felt like an arrogant kid who talked big but couldn't actually do anything. Without an outlet for his frustration, he felt as if he was losing his mind. Tears streamed down his face. His father restrained him, tied him up, and imprisoned him in the room, binding him with a supernatural technique so that he couldn't escape.

Kouji was left to wonder if his father had already captured Miyo, if he'd taken her to the Saimoris' house. Miyo was in danger, but he hadn't even been able to stand up to his own father and thwart his evil plan. And he had only himself to blame for fence-sitting for so long. His behavior hadn't been rooted in kindness. Quite the opposite—he was indecisive, cowardly, spineless. He'd let the situation get this bad by refusing to act sooner.

"I'm such an idiot…"

If he'd genuinely wanted to protect Miyo, he would have made an effort to do so earlier. Now it was too late. He'd never developed his supernatural abilities, so if he tried to fight the Saimoris, he'd only wind up humiliated…

The sound of the door opening interrupted his self-reproach.

"So are you going to just give up?"

Now his older brother was taunting him. The elder Tatsuishi's mocking confidence and flashy man-about-town looks annoyed Kouji to no end.

"Of course not. I'm going to save Miyo!"

His brother laughed at this spirited reply as if he'd heard a good joke…before undoing the binding their father had conjured around Kouji with unexpected facility.

"Why are you helping me…?"

"Shouldn't you be going after him instead of worrying about that?"

Kouji nodded briefly and dashed out of the room to the tune of his brother's irritating laughter.

"We'll get there soon. Acting so impatient won't help any, Mr. Tatsuishi," Kiyoka calmly admonished Kouji, who was sitting in the passenger seat next to him.

"You don't seem fazed at all, even though something awful could be happening to your fiancée right now," came Kouji's surly reply.

Kiyoka was almost frighteningly calm. His expression was practically statuesque, as if he wasn't the least bit anxious about his kidnapped fiancée.

He was so perfect. Kouji couldn't name one thing this man was lacking. It was only too obvious that Kouji couldn't hold a candle to him, as a Gift-user or as a man, and no amount of effort on his part would ever change that.

But would Miyo be in safe hands with him? What did he know about her? Was he aware of her sorrows, her loneliness, the wounds in her heart? Maybe Kiyoka was only making a show of going to rescue her, but did he really care? *What if he abandons her, too?* If it came to that, Kouji would have to kill Miyo and then himself. He'd been considering that eventuality for some time. It would be the best way to ensure she wouldn't suffer anymore. Although he did realize that it wasn't quite right for him to decide that for her, he couldn't think of a better plan.

But Kouji would soon discover that his readiness to die was entirely senseless.

Miyo awoke to the smell of musty air. The room she was in was dark, but as her eyes adjusted, she could make out some shapes, so there must have been a light source. However, she couldn't see outside, so she didn't know whether it was still day or night. She was lying on a dusty wooden floor—they must have thrown her down there like a sack of potatoes. Her hands were bound with rope, so she sat up with difficulty.

Where am I?

As she scanned the room for any telltale clues, she realized she knew this place. Her most horrible memory flashed back in her mind. The narrow, empty room, cold and damp. There was no doubt about it—this was the Saimori storehouse where she'd been locked up as a child.

Most storehouses had the same layout, and there was nothing to indicate beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was the Saimoris', but everything about it was exactly as she remembered. That was enough to convince her it was the one.

That meant either Kaya or her stepmother had abducted her. While she didn't understand why they'd do that, she wouldn't have put it past them. Their contempt for her ran deep. Given a chance to torment her again, they would have pounced on it.

Having established this much about her situation, Miyo started thinking about what might happen to her, which made her very afraid. At the same time, she felt guilty for troubling Kiyoka and Yurie. Kiyoka had probably been told about the abduction by now. Would he try to rescue her? Tears of shame welled up in her eyes for being such a burden.

Miyo's pulse thumped loudly in her ears. Her stepmother or Kaya might come in at any moment. She couldn't imagine what they would do to her, which frightened her even more. She'd been so

relieved to leave her family home and find a place where she felt safe. She thought she'd gotten a little stronger, but it was actually the opposite—she'd become less resilient. If she broke into tears in front of her abusers, they would only mock her with satisfaction.

Determined, Miyo stood up and slammed her body against the door, desperately hoping she would have enough strength to smash it open now that she was a grown woman. But just like back then, the door didn't budge.

So much for hoping…

The door was barred, not latched. She couldn't possibly break free.

There was no other way out. The sole window was too high to reach and likely too small to squeeze through anyway. As much as she didn't want to give up, there was clearly nothing she could do, so she sat down on the floor like a prisoner awaiting execution. Then she heard something outside.

"…"

She stiffened, breaking into a cold sweat. With bated breath, she stared at the door, listening to the dull sound of the wooden bar being removed.

"Oh, so you're awake?"

It was her sister, just as she'd suspected. Miyo squared her shoulders reflexively. Kaya had a servant unlock the door for her. She slowly walked up to the storehouse and stopped just outside, the late-afternoon sun at her back.

Kaya seemed flawless as usual, what with her beautiful face resembling her mother's, the kimono she wore in trendy bright colors, and her clear, high-pitched voice. Yet, her dark eyes were clouded with hate.

“You were passed out cold for so long that I started to wonder if maybe you were dead.”

She giggled strangely, without her usual leisurely confidence. Kaya seemed distracted, or perhaps giddy with anticipation.

“Why are you…? Why are you doing this?”

Miyo was so scared and anxious that she couldn’t breathe normally. Her voice cracked pitifully. Kaya’s sneer grew wider as she watched her sister tremble on the filthy floor of the storehouse.

“That’s better. A pretty kimono like that doesn’t become you. But now that it’s dirty, it suits you more.”

“…”

Miyo couldn’t think of a retort. The truth was that, deep down, she agreed with Kaya. Kiyoka’s gifts of expensive clothing had made her nervous because she didn’t think she deserved them. Hunched over and staring down at the ground, Miyo didn’t notice another person coming in until she heard footsteps next to her. All of a sudden, sharp pain seized her cheek, and she fell over with a short gasp.

“It’s all your fault!”

The voice belonged to her stepmother. She’d struck Miyo with her folding fan. Those words were a staple of Miyo’s childhood memories. Since her stepmother had blamed her for everything and anything, Miyo had heard them countless times.

“You’re ruining my life again!”

“Ugh…”

She instinctively opened her mouth to apologize before stopping herself.

“Is this how you pay me back for raising you? You rotten wench, getting brazen just because you were sent away!”

"…"

Miyo wanted to stand up for herself for a change, but she couldn't summon the courage to mount a comeback against her stepmother, who was raging like a demon from hell. She wouldn't listen anyway. Nothing Miyo could say would make any difference—not in the past, and not now.

"You disgust me. Don't you know your place is with the servants? Don't think you're someone just because we offered you to the Kudous!"

Miyo lay on the floor with her hands fettered, unable to get up. Kanoko dug her foot into her stomach.

"It hurts…!"

Her stepmother sent a flurry of kicks to her shoulders and abdomen. She stopped only to grab Miyo by her hair next and painfully pull her up. Opening her eyes, Miyo saw Kanoko and Kaya standing next to each other and glaring daggers at her.

"You will break the engagement."

"…!"

Miyo froze at her stepmother's words.

"Yes, that's exactly what you'll do!" Kaya agreed, leaning in. "Being Kudou's wife is too much for you, dear sister. So let's trade."

A part of Miyo's brain still remained calm and rational, so she understood how she'd incurred her sister's and stepmother's wrath. They couldn't stand that Kiyoka Kudou had accepted someone they'd so despised. In their minds, this marriage was never supposed to happen. But now that it seemed likely, it drove them mad with rage.

"You should've died in a gutter like you were meant to," Kanoko spat.

“Ngh!”

Miyo’s stepmother kept yanking her by the hair. The cheek she’d struck burned as it pulsated with pain. Miyo tasted blood. Her lip must have been cut.

“Now listen to what I’m about to say. You will tell Mr. Kudou that you don’t want to marry him. If you had the boldness to ask him to buy you pretty clothes like this, you can ask him to send you home.”

“Don’t worry, Miyo. After I marry Mr. Kudou, you can have Kouji back.”

“…”

It would have been easy to do as they ordered. Whenever they had stolen from her, she had refused to fight back, just so their abuse would end sooner. That was how she’d managed to survive. This was the path of least resistance. Clinging to what had been important to her and trying to hold out against them would only prolong her pain and suffering, which was worse. If she agreed to their demands, they would probably let her go at once. She would return to servitude, build thick walls around her heart, and be alone once again. If she kept her head low, she’d be less likely to become a target for violence. She’d believed that for so long.

“—do it.”

“What was that?”

“I… I won’t do it.”

She wouldn’t give in. She wouldn’t give up Kiyoka and the life she could have with him. The one time Miyo had opposed her stepmother, it had ended with her surrendering the mementos of her mother. But she wouldn’t let them steal her future with Kiyoka. She wouldn’t let anyone take that from her.

“I…won’t do what you want.”

Despite the pain, she raised her eyes to meet their gazes. She wouldn't look away, and neither would she bow her head again. This resistance amplified her stepmother's fury. She tightened her grip on Miyo's hair, pulled her closer, and struck her down with her fan again.

"Don't you dare talk back!"

After she fell to the floor, her stepmother hit her shoulders. Miyo clenched her teeth and endured the stinging pain.

"Don't forget your place! You're worthless! Unlike Kaya, you don't have Spirit-Sight, so you don't have any value! It was a preposterous idea to offer you, the family embarrassment, as a bride for Mr. Kudou!"

"What's wrong, Miyo? You'll get this house *and* Kouji. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"I…"

She wouldn't bend, no matter what they said. Miyo sealed her fear away deep in her heart and glared back at her stepmother and sister with defiance.

"I'm Kiyoka Kudou's fiancée, and I'm not going to give him up!"

Face turning red from rage, Kanoko raised her hand at Miyo again.

"We're here."

Lost in reverie, Kouji hadn't noticed when Kiyoka pulled up by the main gate to the Saimori residence. He quickly got out of the car and followed. It was semidark already, and the overcast sky blocked the fading light of the setting sun. The heavy old gate, firmly shut, stood imposingly before them.

"What do we do? They might refuse to let us in…"

“That won’t be a problem.”

There was not a trace of hesitation in Kiyoka’s voice. He raised his hand, and Kouji was momentarily blinded by a flash of bright light and deafened by thunder.

“Guh…”

It was as if lightning had struck right beside them…until Kouji realized that was exactly what had happened. He smelled burnt wood. Soon after, he regained his sight. Sure enough, the gate was charred and in pieces. The ability Kiyoka had used was tremendously powerful. Kouji had heard something about a Gift enabling control over lightning, but he never imagined it could be this destructive.

“Let’s go.”

“Huh? Ah, yes…”

Though Kouji was still in shock and frightened by what he’d witnessed, he pulled himself together and followed Kiyoka. He caught a glimpse of the other man’s eyes then—and the wrath within. It was so intense that Kiyoka’s pale-blue eyes seemed to be lit from within by flames of fury.

He’s…enraged?

Kouji had taken Kiyoka’s lack of expression as a sign that he hadn’t cared about Miyo. His emotionless voice as coming from a cold heart. A question began to form on Kouji’s lips as he hurried behind Kiyoka, but he didn’t speak it. It would be pointless to ask it now. He was unlikely to get a reply, and he would soon find out the answer anyway. Keeping his mouth shut, he hastened his pace so as not to fall behind.

The din and tremors from the lightning strike that had destroyed the gate sent panic through the Saimori estate. The servants, and even Shinichi Saimori himself, came out to investigate. When they

discovered the gate had been burned down, they ran around the grounds in confusion. No one dared to stop Kiyoka and Kouji as they strode confidently toward the main house.

Shinichi was the first to regain his senses.

“Mr. Kudou! What is the meaning of this?!” he called out in bewilderment.

“Where is Miyo?” Kiyoka demanded.

“!”

Shinichi gasped, and all blood drained from his face. He looked as if he was about to faint. Drops of perspiration appeared on his forehead.

“M-Miyo? She—”

“You won’t be getting Miyo back,” Minoru interjected, walking up from behind Shinichi.

“Father! Have you no shame?!”

Kouji took a step toward Minoru, ready to lash out, but Kiyoka held him back.

“I’ve asked where you’re keeping my fiancée.”

“No point in asking. She’s told me she never wants to see you again.”

“I’d rather hear that from her. If you’re not going to tell me where she is, then get out of my way.”

Kiyoka and Minoru glared at each other, neither intending to back down. Despite Kouji now being on hostile terms with his father, he was nevertheless impressed that Minoru wasn’t intimidated by Kiyoka. The man’s furious aura seemed to make the air around him

shimmer. But it also clearly illustrated how deeply Kouji's father desired Miyo's bloodline.

"I will not let you pass," said Minoru. "Try to force your way through, and I will do whatever it takes to hold you back. I will also report you for trespassing."

"Do what you like, but you cannot stop me."

Kouji was expecting Kiyoka to turn violent, but he didn't. Neither did he draw his sword nor use his powers. He simply kept walking slowly, his rage palpable. Minoru and Shinichi lost their composure first and conjured a barrier in a panic. But it failed to impede Kiyoka's progress. The best Gift-user of his generation continued marching forward without making any movements or gestures that indicated the use of a special ability. Both Shinichi and Minoru had combat experience, yet Kiyoka ripped through their magical barriers as if they were mere tissue paper. This did far more than just unsettle his opponents. Realizing how much more powerful Kiyoka was compared with them, Minoru and Shinichi succumbed to pure terror. Even Kouji was pale as a ghost as he quietly followed Kiyoka.

"So the Kudous' reputation wasn't just a fable…"

Kiyoka had reached the two older men and had driven them against a wall. With their Gifts useless, they changed their approach. Minoru tried to punch Kiyoka, who swiftly grabbed his arm and threw him into the air. Then Kiyoka fixed his burning gaze on Shinichi, who took half a step back before his legs buckled under him and he limply crumpled to the ground. Shinichi wasn't even going to try brawling. Compared with Kiyoka, he was as weak as a child—no, an infant—so resistance would be futile.

Such a vast difference between Gift-users in the service of the emperor was unfathomable. Kouji was no longer envious. Kiyoka didn't seem human to him anymore but rather a cold-blooded

demon that destroyed anything in its wake. He merely felt grateful that this man was his ally.

Kouji furtively glanced at his father and Shinichi lying on the ground but couldn't bear looking at them, so he hurried on toward the Saimoris' house. This was a sprawling residence, a wooden building that was a maze of rooms and corridors. Since it had been designed so that every walkway offered a garden view, the house was composed of many small courtyards and a larger rear garden. In days past, this kind of elaborate architecture immediately identified the wealthiest of families to onlookers.

"Tatsuishi, do you know where they'd keep Miyo?" Kiyoka asked without turning to look at him. Caught off guard, Kouji quickly tried to think of the most likely places.

"Her old room in the servants' quarters… No, hold on."

If Kaya and Kanoko were with her, it couldn't have been that room. They wouldn't be caught dead in the servants' quarters. Maybe Miyo's original room, then? No, that one was next to her mother's, so Kanoko hated being near it. It was an old house, and old houses with their thin walls didn't offer much privacy. There wasn't really anywhere secluded where you could hold a captive… Or was there?

"There's this storehouse in the garden out back…"

"Yes?"

"It's really old and not used for much… I think they may be keeping her there."

The storehouse could be barred from the outside. The more Kouji thought about it, the more convinced he became that it was the right place. Kiyoka nodded in agreement.

"Show me the way," he said.

"Follow me."

“Wait—behind you!”

Kouji turned in surprise to see a fast-advancing vortex of flames—one of his father’s Gift abilities. Minoru followed behind it in fierce pursuit. Kouji couldn’t will himself to move as the mass of fire approached him. He didn’t know how to react, nor could he do anything to shield himself.

“The hotheaded fool just won’t give up,” Kiyoka spat with loathing.

No sooner had he spoken than an invisible wall he’d conjured separated Kouji from the vortex.

“A barrier…”

But his relief was short-lived. When the flame vortex crashed into the impenetrable magical barrier, it expanded left and right. The building walls caught fire immediately, and the conflagration quickly spread to engulf the inner courtyards, burning down trees, scorching grass.

“This is terrible…”

Kouji wished he could cover his eyes so as not to see the destruction. The infernal flames born from his father’s tenacity were swallowing up everything in their path. Even a child could imagine what would happen if fire blazed uncontrollably inside a residence built from wood and paper. As Kouji stood there horrified, he heard a zapping sound and saw his father suddenly collapse. He couldn’t say what he felt at that moment. Should he have felt sorry for his father, who would have burned him to death if Kiyoka hadn’t intervened?

“I only gave him a small shock to paralyze him. We need to hurry before the fire spreads.”

They were there to rescue Miyo, not to duel with Minoru or put out fires. As for Kouji, he never wanted anything to do with his father

again. That day, he finally decided to walk his own path and wash his hands of his father's schemes.

Suddenly, there was thunder and the shaking of the earth. They sensed it even in the storehouse at the back of the residence.

"What was that…?"

Kaya and Kanoko looked at each other in surprise. Kanoko relaxed her grip on Miyo's hair, and the girl fell to her knees.

"Check what's going on," Miyo's stepmother ordered her servant.

Her voice sounded far away to Miyo, who was growing dazed. Her shoulders had been struck so violently that her arms had gone numb. Getting slapped across the face had made her feel increasingly foggy.

"Was it you? Did you do something?"

Miyo barely registered the harsh tone of her stepmother's accusations. It didn't affect her in the slightest.

"M-me…?"

What was her stepmother even implying? What could Miyo have done as a prisoner, bound and helpless?

"Mother, you have to get her to say it."

"I will. Miyo, say that you're breaking the engagement with Kudou, now!"

Her voice was so distant.

"No… I won't say that."

Miyo couldn't focus, could barely think, but she wouldn't give in. She wouldn't let them have their way. There was only a single wish in

her heart, and from this wish she derived the strength to keep resisting her oppressors.

"Shameless wench! You have no right to disagree!"

Red-faced from anger, Kanoko grabbed Miyo by the neck. Miyo saw the word *death* spelled in her mind's eye. The letters faded quickly. But she didn't despair, although she had a hunch that if she simply gave up now, death would promptly arrive. She remembered how she'd made peace with her demise earlier, when her sorrowful, painful life hadn't seemed worth living anymore. When she hadn't belonged anywhere. But Miyo had been wrong—there was a place for her in this world at Kiyoka's side.

"I…won't…say…it."

Kaya grimaced in exasperation, and Kanoko squeezed Miyo's throat tighter.

Mr. Kudou, I didn't give up. I didn't apologize this time, either. I don't want to leave you. I don't want to die just yet…

"Mr. Kudou…"

"Miyo!"

Everything had gone dark in front of her, but she heard her name being called. She'd been waiting to hear this voice. His voice.

"Mr. Kudou…?"

Aghast, Kanoko released Miyo. She crumpled to the floor again.

"Miyo!"

Kiyoka rushed to her side without paying attention to anyone else. He undid her fetters and lifted her beaten body into an embrace. He really had come all this way for her.

She coughed, gasping for air with tears in her eyes as an overwhelming relief washed over her. She'd never doubted him. She

knew that this kindhearted man wouldn't have abandoned her. It was just the way he was.

"Mr. Ku…dou…"

"Everything's going to be just fine."

He looked pained, on the verge of tears. Was it because he felt so sorry for her, battered and abused? If so, she wanted to apologize for saddening him. But she didn't feel ashamed—the wounds were her badge of honor. For the first time in her life, Miyo hadn't yielded to her tormentors. Despite the pressure from her family, she hadn't allowed them to bend her will.

Kiyoka carefully cradled his fiancée in his arms after she fell unconscious. She weighed so little, even dressed in the elaborate kimono, which was by no means light. There was a welt on her cheek—she must have been struck with a blunt object—that he reached for in disbelief, stopping his fingers before they touched her skin to avoid hurting her. The two women who'd done this to her were standing close by.

"…What did you do to make her like this?"

"…"

They twitched at his quiet question, surprised. Did they think they'd get away with this? As he examined their faces, he felt a surge of anger. He was amazed at their audacity.

"How could you beat a helpless girl? What did you want from her?"

"Well…"

Kanoko kept her mouth shut sullenly, but Kaya was unfazed.

“I’ve done nothing wrong.” She raised her chin haughtily and stared down at Miyo, who was cradled in Kiyoka’s arms. “I was merely trying to correct a mistake.”

“What mistake?”

“Miyo being offered to you as a bride, obviously. My family must have done it in error. The girl’s useless, you know. She doesn’t have Spirit-Sight, plus she’s stupid and ugly. She didn’t even make a good servant. Someone like her was going to marry above me? Ludicrous. The arrangement was a huge mistake, plain and simple.”

“…”

“My parents agree that I’m better than her. I’m the superior daughter. *I* deserve to be your wife. Even Kouji’s father agrees.”

Kaya was incensed, fully convinced that she was in the right. As far as she was concerned, her hatred for Miyo wasn’t an unreasonable personal grudge but a natural reaction to having her rights ignored. Kiyoka imagined that she’d grown to be so twisted because her parents had ingrained this entitlement in her. He could even feel sorry for her. But she’d incurred his wrath, so he would not forgive her just because she’d been raised to be deluded.

“You’ll undoubtedly be more satisfied with me than her, Mr. Kudou. I’m better than her in every way, so you should—”

“Shut up.”

“!”

His piercing gaze frightened her into silence. Kiyoka couldn’t stand listening to her nonsense. She wasn’t even trying to justify her wrongdoing—she truly believed in her innocence, which made his stomach turn.

“Don’t waste my time with such drivel.”

“What…? Why won’t you understand?! You’re so cruel!”

She was one to talk, but it was pointless to argue with someone so misguided. Besides, the fire laying waste to the main estate would soon spread here.

“Mrs. Saimori! Lady Kaya! There’s a fire! It isn’t safe here!”

The servant Kayoko had sent to check on things had just come sprinting back. Kouji, who’d been silently standing by until then, went over to Kaya.

“Kaya, you can’t stay here. The same goes for you, Mrs. Saimori. We need to leave.”

“My house is…is burning?”

Kanoko was horrified. She stumbled out of the storehouse to see the black smoke spewing from the main residence.

“No! Nooo…!” she screamed. “Not my house!”

Kiyoka didn’t concern himself with anyone other than Miyo. As he lifted her off the ground to carry her out of the storehouse, Kaya grabbed his sleeve.

“Don’t go! Please, Mr. Kudou—!”

Exasperated, Kiyoka shook himself free of her and glared at her with unmasked animosity.

“I’ve had enough of your arrogance. I don’t care about pretty faces or the Gift. The sky would have to fall for me to choose an egotistical woman like you for a wife! Get out of my way.”

She flinched and took a step back. Kiyoka didn’t spare her a second look as he left the storehouse with Miyo in his arms.

Kouji stopped his fiancée from trying to reach for Kiyoka again as he was leaving.

"We need to get out of here now."

"No… Why? Why is this happening to me?!"

"We need to go, Kaya."

"Get your hands off me!" She flew into a rage when he tried to lead her out by the arm. "I don't understand! I've done nothing wrong!"

"Kaya…"

Outside, Kanoko was shrieking about how this was all Miyo's fault. Kouji lost his patience. He sighed and proceeded to drag Kaya out despite her protests. Once they were outside, he grabbed the raging Kanoko as well, forcing her to walk with them.

"Let me go! Unhand me at once!"

"Enough already!" Kouji yelled.

"What's gotten into you? It's Miyo you like, right? Just leave me and run to save your skin!"

Blood rushed to his head again. He didn't even understand why he felt compelled to save these women. But he had to.

"You're right! Miyo *is* most important to me. Of course she is. But she'd be sad if you died, and I won't let you and your family cause her any more pain!"

He'd do whatever was in his power to prevent these vile people from making Miyo cry again. If it was to spare Miyo suffering, he'd even save those whom he hated.

Hearing her mild-mannered fiancé direct such harsh, angry words at her, Kaya fell silent and looked down sulkily. She didn't speak again as they fled the burning residence.

CHAPTER 5

Endings and New Beginnings

That cherry tree again. Miyo was dreaming about it for the second time.

"Mother."

The cherry tree in the Saimoris' garden was in full bloom. Next to it stood Miyo's mother, the color of her kimono matching the flowers. She was beckoning her daughter closer, smiling. Miyo took a hesitant step toward her. Then another, and another, but just like in her first dream, she wasn't getting any closer.

"Mother, I…"

She didn't finish saying "I want to go over to your side" because she heard another voice calling her name, one she couldn't let go unanswered.

"I'll see you again, Mother!"

Her mother continued gesturing for her to come closer, but Miyo headed in the other direction.

She awoke to the familiar sight of her room in Kiyoka's house after it was all over. A doctor had examined her, and although she didn't have any broken bones, she was severely bruised, so they advised her to rest for a few days. Kiyoka took time off from work to look after her, which made her feel happy, anxious, and further indebted to him.

Yurie had cried with relief when he'd brought Miyo back. She'd been worried Miyo might die from dehydration if her captors locked

her up. Yurie had also been busy seeing to the needs of Kiyoka, who'd been taking care of Miyo—she was much obliged to both of them. And later on, bit by bit, Kiyoka told Miyo what had happened to her family home.

"It burned down…?"

"Yes." Tension lined his face. "The house was made of wood and had many gardens. It all went up in smoke very fast."

He admitted that he couldn't have done anything to quench the blaze Minoru Tatsuishi had conjured. Fortunately, no one had died.

"As for your parents… They've dismissed roughly half the servants and moved to a smaller residence in the countryside. They'll have to get used to a much lower standard of living. This might also be the end of their career serving the emperor. House Saimori has been ruined."

"Ruined…"

Since Miyo had never been allowed to enjoy any of the privileges that came from having a wealthy family, she wasn't sure what to make of this news.

"And what about Kaya?"

"She's been sent to serve a family infamous for their strict house rules. She's young; the experience will help her build some character."

Although Kaya possessed Spirit-Sight, she could use only the most basic of supernatural techniques and had no special powers. As such, there was no harm in sending her away to stay with ordinary people.

Miyo was relieved that everyone would have a roof above their head, at least.

"What happened to the Tatsuishis…?"

“Minoru Tatsuishi’s crimes haven’t been made public. He won’t be taken to court, but he accepted responsibility for the incident by stepping down as the head of the household. His eldest son, Kazushi, now holds that title, and he agreed to remain under my direct supervision, which will limit some of his freedoms. This puts the Tatsuishi family effectively under my command.”

“Oh…I see.”

Naturally, Kiyoka wouldn’t have forgone punishing the people who’d tortured his fiancée. He’d dealt with them as harshly as if they were common criminals and had achieved such arrangements not so much through discussion as with intimidation. But this, Miyo didn’t need to know. They’d lost their status, houses, and wealth, their families reduced to mere shadows of their former selves. Perhaps they wouldn’t be able to cope with these drastic changes, but Kiyoka held no pity for them.

The next few days passed in the blink of an eye.

“Are you feeling all right?” Kiyoka asked Miyo.

“Yes. I wasn’t seriously injured to begin with…”

He helped her get out of his car. It was a cloudy day with weak sunshine, pleasantly cool for summer. They’d driven to what remained of the Saimori residence. The charred ruins would be cleared away any day, so Miyo had insisted on visiting before then. Kiyoka wasn’t in favor of coming here with her again, but in the end, he’d reluctantly agreed. She was adamant about checking on something on the premises.

“Watch your step.”

“I’ll be careful.”

The house in which she’d been born and raised had almost burned to the ground. Some foundations and pillars were still standing, but

the rest had turned to ashes, so it was impossible to tell where one room ended and another began. It was difficult for Miyo to make out what had been where even though she'd lived there almost her entire life. Since the house had been leveled, they could walk right over it. Though Miyo felt a twinge of sadness at the sight, it didn't last long. Guided by her memory, she headed toward her destination. Kiyoka sometimes lent her a hand to ensure she wouldn't trip over any debris, but they walked on in silence.

Miyo was making her way toward the largest of the inner courtyards, the one where a cherry tree had once stood. Her mother's tree. It had been cut down after it had withered, but the stump had never been removed. That particular courtyard could be accessed only from Miyo's original room and her mother's. No one besides the servants who tidied it sporadically had set foot there in many years, not even a gardener. The stump had since died and turned gray. Nevertheless, Miyo had wanted to see it because of her dream about her mother in a pink kimono, standing beside this tree, beckoning her daughter closer. Since she hadn't been able to stop thinking about it, she'd felt compelled to visit this place.

There it was, burned to charcoal but still recognizable. As she squatted next to the stump, Kiyoka sat on his haunches next to her.

"This is what you wanted to see?"

"Yes… It's what's left of the cherry tree planted when my mother married."

Even she hadn't spent much time in this garden. This stump of the tree that had been cut down when she was only a toddler had been a sad reminder of all the other things from her mother that she'd lost. Just looking at it made Miyo lonely.

Slowly, she reached out for it and brushed it with her fingertips. The old, thick stump crumbled at her touch, as if made of sand. Something else happened simultaneously.

“Oh…”

Miyo felt a sharp pain in her head, like an electric shock. It lasted for only a split second, so she didn’t cry out, and when it was gone, she doubted whether it had even happened.

“Is something the matter?”

“N-no…”

She’d jerked her hand away from the stump in surprise, flexed her fingers, and made a fist. The pain must have been from her earlier injuries. Maybe she hadn’t fully recovered yet. This explanation satisfied her.

“Shall we go?”

“Yes, let’s.”

Now the only mark Miyo’s mother had left in this world was Miyo herself. But that was fine. In fact, that was probably why her mother had called her there—to show her it was time to move on. And so she would. While she would not deny her past, it would be a closed chapter from here on out. She’d had her share of misfortune, but now she had the means to attain happiness.

They walked out of the broken gate and saw a familiar face on the street.

“Kouji…”

When she called his name, he stared at her with slight befuddlement and maybe a hint of guilt.

“Miyo… It’s…it’s been a while.”

“Yes, it has.”

Not counting the brief moment before she fell unconscious when Kouji and Kiyoka came to rescue her, she had last seen him a month ago, when he’d been with Kaya in the city. They hadn’t gotten to talk back then, so it felt as if she hadn’t seen him in even longer.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m much better now, thank you.”

“I’m glad to hear that… Say, do you have a moment or two to talk? I won’t be able to stay in the city much longer, so this might be our last chance to chat.”

Miyo had heard Kiyoka had found her so quickly thanks to Kouji, so she wanted to thank him. But if Kiyoka said no, she wouldn’t insist. She glanced up at him questioningly. He heaved a sigh and nodded. She had his permission.

“Sure, let’s talk.”

“Thanks. Do you mind if we go over there?”

They walked away a little and sat down on stone steps shaded by trees. They used to rest here when playing outside when they were little. Those stolen moments with Kouji had made her childhood bearable after she’d lost her mother and her place in the family. She owed him a debt of gratitude for having been her only friend back then.

“…Thank you from the bottom of my heart for coming to my rescue.”

“I wish I could say you’re welcome, but the truth is, I didn’t do anything. I was powerless. All I managed to do to help you was to tell your fiancé what happened.”

He looked dejected.

“Kiyoka told me that if it weren’t for you, he wouldn’t have been able to come to my aid so quickly,” Miyo added.

“…I suppose that’s right. So I did contribute that way.”

She thought of saying something encouraging to him but stopped herself. He wouldn’t have wanted her to stroke his damaged ego purely out of sympathy.

“Not being able to do anything was incredibly frustrating. I may have inherited the Gift, but my abilities are worthless. I used to think all that mattered was that I had it and could pass it on, so I gave up on trying to improve it. But the one time when my Gifts actually mattered, when I wanted to save you, they were so useless that I had to give up then, too.”

Even though he didn’t have notable powers, Kouji had supported her in another way—by getting angry at her mistreatment. That was what really mattered to her. Without him, she’d have truly been without a single ally, so she might not have had the strength to survive.

“You’ve probably heard from Mr. Kudou already, but I’ve decided to undergo training.”

No longer anguished, he looked at her with eyes glinting with optimism. He was going to move to the old capital and train to become an adept Gift-user. Many renowned Gifted families still lived there, and the knowledge of supernatural abilities and techniques hadn’t yet fallen into obscurity as it had in the imperial capital. As such, it was far better suited for his needs. However, going away to train didn’t mean he was freed from his other obligations. He was still engaged to Kaya and had been designated the next head of the Saimori family. Depending on whether he went on to become a

recognized Gift-user, he might be able to restore the Saimoris to high status one day—or so Kiyoka had told him.

That was certainly a better way to frame it than admitting that Kouji would have to leave his home city due to a scandal his family had caused. Additionally, repairing the reputation of the Saimoris, who hadn't been mobilized for anti-Grotesquerie missions in a very long time, would be no easy task. Though it was a tall order, at least he finally had the agency to make a difference.

Miyo couldn't offer him any practical advice, but she would support him with her encouragement.

"I'm going to give this my all. And you, Miyo… You'll be safe with Mr. Kudou. He can protect you. And I'll train to grow stronger so that I'll also be able to protect what's important to me."

"I wish you the best of luck."

Just like Miyo, Kouji had decided to move on with his life with renewed hope. She, too, would train, sparing no effort—to become a worthy wife to Kiyoka. As she considered her own resolutions, she momentarily lost herself in thought.

"By the way…"

"Yes?"

He scratched his cheek in embarrassment, struggling to get the words out.

"Do you remember when I tried to tell you something important that day…?"

She immediately understood that he meant the day her family had told her to wed Kiyoka Kudou. It was fresh in her memory.

"I wanted to—"

At the time, she'd been so anxious about her future, so overwhelmed by despair, that it hadn't mattered to her what he was going to say, so she'd just left it hanging. And while she could calmly ask him about it now, she sensed that what he wanted wasn't to continue that conversation. Instead, she gave him the answer he was hoping for.

"I'm very sorry, but I don't remember…"

"You don't?"

"I'm afraid not. You said it was important?"

"Oh, um… No, not really. It's fine. Don't worry about it."

He nodded to himself a few times and brightened up, as if her answer had taken a load off his chest and decided something for him. Miyo was glad to see that.

"We should head back. Your fiancé might get mad at me if I keep you to myself for too long."

"All right."

They headed back to the gate of the Saimori residence in a lighter mood. Miyo broke into a run for the last few steps and announced her return. Kiyoka smiled and stroked her head affectionately.

"Seems you enjoyed yourself."

"Yes, I did. Sorry for keeping you waiting."

"I don't mind. If you're finished here, we should head back home."

Miyo turned one last time toward Kouji.

"Kouji, let's meet again someday."

"Until next time, Miyo."

He waved at her with a little smile, and she bowed lightly back at him before getting in Kiyoka’s car. Nothing more would tie her to this place.

Kouji stood on the street and watched the car until it vanished from his sight.

๛ *EPILOGUE* ๛

The official engagement between Kiyoka Kudou and Miyo Saimori was a simple matter that required only a couple of signatures on an official document. It wasn't a big step like marriage. Besides denoting the beginning of the waiting period before they'd marry, it didn't really change anything between them. The situation between their families being as it was, there was no exchange of engagement gifts.

As for Kiyoka's family, in his own words, they were leading a quiet life in retirement and didn't need to be involved. Kiyoka and Miyo would probably need to see them at least once before they got married, as etiquette required, but they wouldn't require their permission to tie the knot. As the head of the family, Kiyoka could make that decision for himself. He did contact his father, though, to tell him to stop looking for marriage offers for him. That was when Miyo learned his father had brought them together.

"He's the one who coordinated the propositions. Whenever he would hear of a lady of a suitable age who matched his requirements, he would send a go-between to make the arrangements."

Based on his weary visage, Miyo imagined that he'd had a rough time with the previous candidates. On what basis had Kiyoka's father selected the prospective brides? She didn't know the details, but if one of the criteria was being of marriageable age, then the only girl who fit that description at the Saimori house was Kaya, not her. Her family's high rank was a remnant of their past achievements, so no one paid them that much attention. Definitely not enough to learn that their eldest daughter was living among the servants. Her father, Shinichi, must have decided to offer her instead because he was so loath to send Kaya away. Miyo wondered if Kiyoka's father would be disappointed and angry when he discovered he hadn't gotten his son

the woman he'd bargained for. She expressed this worry to Kiyoka, who snorted dismissively.

"If he complains, I'll turn him into a pile of ashes."

Rather than reassure her, his savage remark made her worry for his father instead.

"…Regardless, that ship has sailed," he added as they leisurely strolled the city after completing the paperwork.

"True."

That day, Miyo's parents had left the city for their new home in the countryside, and her sister had departed for the house where she'd be working. Miyo could have gone to see them off, but she hadn't. She didn't have anything to say to them anymore and didn't feel she owed them a good-bye.

"I really made a mess of things," said Kiyoka.

"Mr. Kudou…"

"I feel partially responsible for the incident."

Kiyoka had told her earlier about his first visit to the Saimori residence, when he'd demanded that her family apologize to her if they wanted him to pay them the bride price. In Miyo's opinion, that wasn't an unreasonable thing to ask. She needed some form of closure. To Miyo, being ordered to leave her home to marry was almost synonymous with cutting ties with her family, but her family had soon shown her that they hadn't seen it that way. Without a definitive end to their relationship, they would continue to mock and abuse her whenever they accidentally met in the city, and she would never overcome the feeling of inferiority they'd instilled in her. If they still had the opportunity to make her break down into tears and shiver in fear, she would never heal. She'd absolutely needed to sever the ties that bound them to her, to her past.

“Everything you did for me was necessary.”

“Miyo…”

“And I’m delighted you went to such lengths on my behalf.”

Having someone who cared about her, who was willing to do something—anything—for her, was a blessing. She’d forgotten that joyous feeling until recently. It was Kiyoka, Yurie, and everything that happened since she’d met him that had allowed her to experience that feeling again.

“Miyo.”

“Yes?”

They stopped, and he faced her, earnest and a bit tense. He took her hands in his.

“The future certainly won’t be all roses. I will do my utmost to protect you from any hardship, but I am a soldier. There will be times when I will need to leave you to fight, and the battles I take part in are extremely dangerous. Then there’s the matter of my personality… I’m a bit of a bore, but I’d still like to be by your side.”

“…”

“Would you marry me, difficult as I am?”

They’d met through a marriage proposition neither of them had asked for, but now Kiyoka wanted to set things right by formally proposing to her. Miyo smiled.

“You’re not difficult at all. If anything, it’s me who’s going to be more trouble. Are you sure you won’t regret having me as your wife?”

“Certainly. I chose you myself.”

“Well then, if you’d have me despite my many shortcomings, then I’d be happy to marry you.”

No one was there to witness the vows of the couple standing in the middle of a busy street, but they didn’t mind. They both preferred modesty to ostentation.

“Thank you, Miyo.”

Smiling at each other, they set off toward their small, warm home.

AFTERWORD

Greetings! I'm Akumi Agitogi. Thank you so much for reading my debut novel!

This is the first time I'm writing an afterword, so I'm not sure what to write about. I suppose I should start by telling you a little about myself, though there isn't much to say… But if I really need to come up with some personal trivia to share, then this will have to do: I was kind of worried that people would mock me for my pen name, since one of the characters, *ago*, means "jaw" in Japanese. I just chose it because I liked the look of the Japanese character for that word and thought it would make my name memorable—that's all!

Okay, with that out of the way, let me tell you about the book. My inspiration for the title came from my love of Japanese aesthetics—I really wanted to write a story set in a world of Japanese traditions! Next, I had to pick a historical period to loosely ground my narrative in, and the Meiji and Taisho eras appealed to me the most. It goes without saying that life back then was far less convenient, and I'm not what you'd call a history buff, so that presented an additional challenge for me. Nonetheless, it was a unique time in history when Japanese and Western influences began to mix but hadn't quite blended together yet. In this era, people and things had this peculiar vibrancy to them. I knew immediately that this would be the setting to my novel.

But I didn't want to just write a Meiji/Taisho romance. I also wanted to add some fantasy elements to it, since I'm a huge fan of that genre… That's why I put supernatural abilities—the Gift—into

the narrative and came up with the characters of Kiyoka, a Gift-user, and Miyo, a powerless girl from a bloodline blessed with the Gift. While I struggled somewhat in creating the period-appropriate world where they live, writing these characters was hugely enjoyable.

This book is 100 percent my interests. And thanks to the encouragement of many different people, I actually managed to get it published. Publishing at least one novel was kind of on my bucket list, but I never imagined my dream would come true so quickly. I still can't quite believe it! It took me a lot of time and effort to write it, so I hope somebody out there likes reading it!

By the way, Square Enix is releasing a manga version of my story on the Gangan Online app (as of January 2019). It's drawn by Rito Kousaka, whose illustrations are exquisite and very expressive. Be sure to check it out!

I would like to conclude with sincere thanks to my editor, without whom this book would never have been published. Thank you so much for guiding me on my first clumsy venture into writing!

I would also like to thank Tsukiho Tsukioka for the wonderful cover illustration. Your beautiful drawing helped me flesh out the world of the story!

Another big thank-you goes to my online readers who have been cheering me on, along with everyone who's read this far! I couldn't have done this without you all! Thank you from the bottom of my heart for reading my very first book all the way through to the end!

I hope we'll meet again!

Akumi Agitogi

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